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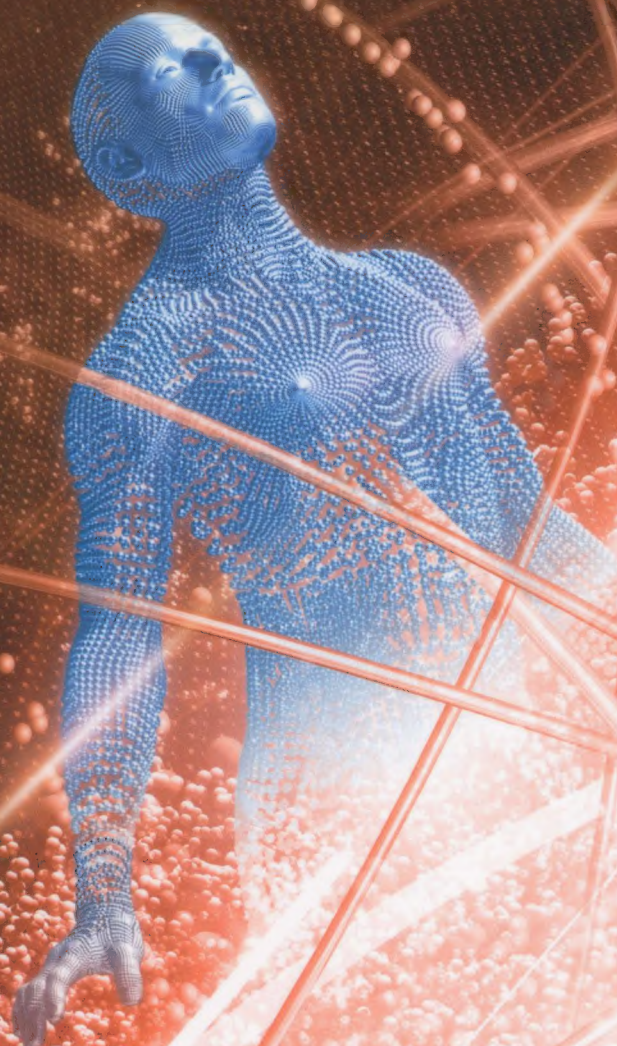
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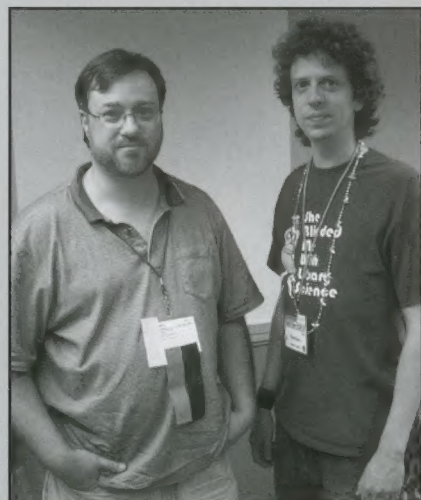
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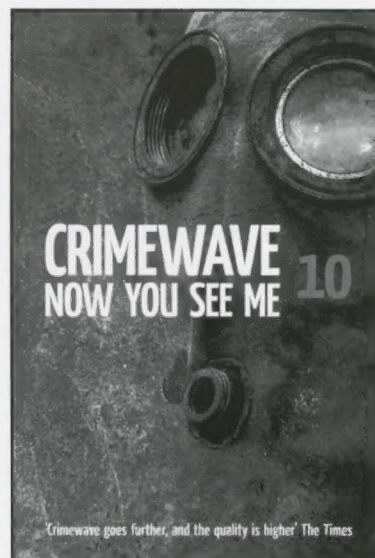
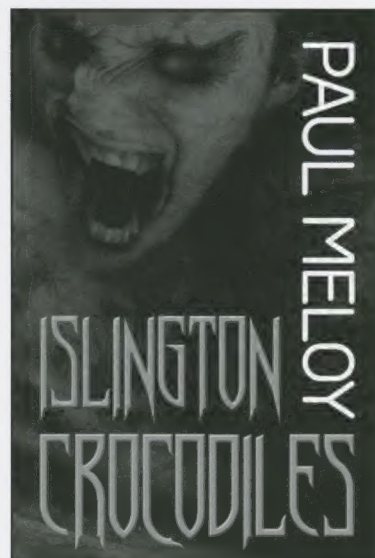
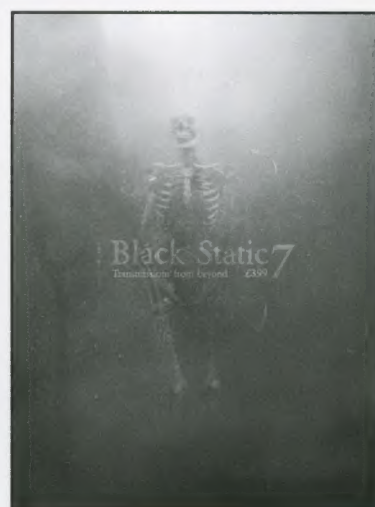
above: Jetse de Vries, Roy Gray and Pete Bullock at Denvention • below left: Pete with Tim Akers • below right: we're Hugo runners-up



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 David Hartwell, and Kevin J. Maroney
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 7 *Abyss & Apex* edited by Wendy S. Delmater
 7 *On Spec* edited by Diane Walton
 6 *Internet Review of Science Fiction* edited by Stacey Janss
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 5 *Jim Baco's Universe* edited by Eric Flint and Mike Resnick
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Editorial

"The critical issue is not technology, but politics," Fritjof Capra says in *The Hidden Connections*, his unflinchingly truthful prophecy of a humane and sustainable future. While his excoriating assessment of the way we live now is harrowing, he sees hope in the possibility of transformation, not of technologies but of human values.

This brings us to positive sf. Recently, a group of sf writers and critics asserted optimism is essential to the relevance and vitality of the genre. They eschewed Dogme 95 style vows – neither prescribing utopian settings nor proscribing conflict in storytelling – but their mini-manifestos are deeply problematic.

Positive sf's cheerleaders celebrate the possibilities of technologically driven change, suggest technology is morally neutral, and see change as inevitable and virtually synonymous with progress. However, technology can be beneficial or detrimental, but is never morally neutral. Projects likely to attract funding are those that augment the wealth and power of governments and corporations.

Change tends to be managed by people who control capital. There have been many beneficial changes – social, cultural and technological – but change does not imply progress. It took many technological breakthroughs to render mass slaughter unremarkable.

Simplistic ideas about technology and progress deepen our current crises – wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; rape of the planet by corporations; unemployment created as a policy instrument by disaster capitalists; global warming; depleted resources; and a fifth of the world's population living in extreme poverty. As eco-cultural soothsayers like Fritjof Capra and Peter Russell (*Waking Up In Time*) point out, hope lies not in our burgeoning toolbox of techniques and technologies but in a possible transformation of ideals and relationships.

Sf that ignores our crises – or focuses on technological fixes – is an artistic cul-de-sac. Stories need not address our problems directly: they can be set on 21st century Earth or elsewhere in the multiverse; they can involve alien or artificial intelligence; they can explore inner or outer space. But they should be informed by our fears. Great sf entertains and raises consciousness. A narrative need not be reassuring; true hope lies in the transformative power of the imagination, compassion and honesty of writers and their readers.



Langford revisits his first word processor

As Others See Us. HMV knows how to woo sf fans: 'Welcome to our first ever sci-fi newsletter, boldly [*sic*] going where no email has gone before. If you love all things sci-fi, know your Star Wars from your Stargate and hide behind the sofa when the Daleks are on telly, then this one's for you ... So strap on your Spock ears and let hmv.com get you closer to sci-fi.'

J-M G Le Clézio, whose futuristic 'nightmare shopping complex' novel *Les géants* (1973) is covered in the *SF Encyclopedia*, won the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Court Circular. Warner Bros and J.K. Rowling won their suit blocking the intended RDR print edition of Steve Vander Ark's *Harry Potter Lexicon*. The judge emphasized that his decision didn't endanger spinoff books in general: this specific Lexicon 'copies distinctive original language from the Harry Potter works in

excess of its otherwise legitimate purpose of creating a reference guide.' However, Warner's lawsuit against the non-fantasy Bollywood film *Hari Puttar – A Comedy of Terrors* was thrown out by the Delhi High Court. Next: Harlan Ellison is suing Paramount, again, for failing to pass on income from licencing of his *City on the Edge of Forever* storyline for a tie-in trilogy by David R. George III. Did *Courthouse News Service* have to headline this 'Harlan Ellison Wants Paramount To Beam Up Royalties For "Star Trek"'? Of course they did.

Eoin Colfer is writing a sixth novel in the late Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series. Oh dear.

Yet More Awards

British Fantasy, best novel: Ramsey Campbell, *The Grin of the Dark*. • *David Gemmell Legend Award*: a new heroic fantasy award in his memory, first

Ansible Link David Langford

presentation due 2009. • *Heinlein*: Ben Bova and Spider Robinson. • *Mythopoeic*, adult fantasy: Catherynne M. Valente, *Orphan's Tales*. Children's: J.K. Rowling, entire *Harry Potter* series. • *SFWA Author Emerita*: M.J. Engh, author of *Arslan*. • *World Fantasy Life Achievement*: Leo & Diane Dillon (art), Patricia McKillip (novels).

Angry Robot is a new HarperCollins print/digital sf imprint run by Marc Gascoigne (late of Games Workshop), publishing 2–3 books monthly from July 2009. I imagine a corporate brainstorm session which – realizing that Paranoid Android had been used – considered Mad Mechanism, Grumbling Golem, Enraged Replicant and Surly Cyborg before inspiration came.

Boris Johnson's 2008 Tory conference speech remembered past humiliation there: '2006 when I was physically pelted with pork pies by the press corps or last year when my speaking style was criticized by Arnold Schwarzenegger. And it was a low moment, my friends, to have my speaking style denounced by a monosyllabic Austrian cyborg.' (*The Register*) Political columnist Simon Hoggart heard and reported this as 'Austrian sideboard'.

Censorship Update. After a 28-year ban, Torbay Council allowed local Devon cinema-goers to watch *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. (*Telegraph*)

As Others See Us II. Why Karel Capek's *War with the Newts* is underrated: 'Another problem is the annexation of apek by the science fiction community ... Keen to upgrade its image, science fiction apologists have displayed a propensity to aggrandize its domain, sticking the label on writers who have precious little to do with space opera or monster hide and seek.' (Peter Swirski, *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*, 2005) That is, giant talking newts who demolish Earth's continents *just aren't sf*.

Scouring of the Shire. The US subprime mortgage debacle led to foreclosure proceedings against the Tolkien-themed 'Shire' housing estate in Bend, Oregon (where round hobbit-hole doors mercifully open on garden storage rather than being main entrances). A December auction is expected; new owners may not fancy

features like artificial-thatch roofs, 'dragon-shaped support beams', 'Ring Bearer's Court', etc. (*Bend Bulletin*)

Jerry Pournelle, after months of radiotherapy for an inoperable brain tumour, announced in August: 'It's official. I no longer have cancer.'

Another Bloody Poll. A Costa Book Awards survey of 'the nation's most cherished and best-loved writers' produced a top 50 beginning: 1 Enid Blyton, 2 Roald Dahl, 3 J.K. Rowling, 4 Jane Austen, 5 William Shakespeare, 6 Charles Dickens, 7 J.R.R. Tolkien, 8 Agatha Christie, 9 Stephen King, 10 Beatrix Potter, 11 C.S. Lewis...

George Takei and his long-time partner Brad Altman were married in September, with Walter Koenig and Nichelle Nichols as best man and matron of honour.

Thog's Masterclass
Creature Features Dept. 'Brown John studied her smile as it performed about

her face.' 'She seemed to be frowning, but it was difficult to tell. Her firm smooth forehead was barely co-operating.' 'Her eyes were large, beautiful, wet wounds.' 'She twisted, rolled again until she was a ball of soft shadows exposing only a pink earlobe, warm, tender and inviting.' 'It was as if her lips were a perch where a soldier could stand guard.' (all from James Silk, *Death Dealer: Prisoner of the Horned Helmet*, 1988) • *Dept of Constructive Metaphor.* 'She takes grains of truth and builds them into vast deserts.' (Brian Herbert & Kevin J. Anderson, *Paul of Dune*, 2008) • *Delicate Euphemism Dept.* 'At the point where in the human male there droops that Thing of Joy which is a Beauty for ever, these ethereal visitors were as bald and smooth as porcelain.' (Richard Cowper, *Kuldesak*, 1972). • *Dept of Neat Tricks with Arms Securely Trussed in a Straitjacket.* 'Percy yipped with pain and began rubbing his lips. He tried to speak, realized he couldn't do it with a hand over his mouth, and lowered it.' (Stephen King, *The Green Mile*, original serial version, 1996)

R • I • P

P.C. Bartrum (1907–2008), scholar of Welsh genealogy and the earliest (*Mabinogion* etc) versions of the Arthur legend, died on 14 August aged 100. (*Independent*)

Ken Campbell (1941–2008), UK actor-director who staged popular adaptations of *Illuminatus!* and *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and enlivened several British sf conventions, died on 31 August; he was 66.

James Killus (1950–2008), US author of *Book of Shadows* (1983) and *Sunsmoke* (1985), died on 23 September.

Paul Newman (1925–2008), legendary US film star, died on 26 September aged 83. Like most long-time actors he'd appeared in sf/fantasy, including *Quintet* (1979) and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994).

Geoffrey Perkins (1953–2008), UK radio/TV producer whose credits include the first two radio series of *Hitchhiker's Guide*, died in a road accident on 29 August; he was 55.

Brian Thomsen (1959–2008), US writer,

anthologist and sf/fantasy consulting editor at Tor, died from a heart attack on 21 September aged 49. He co-wrote Julius Schwartz's autobiography, *Man of Two Worlds: My Life in Science Fiction and Comics* (2000).

David Foster Wallace (1962–2008), US novelist, essayist and professor of creative writing best known for the long and surreally funny sf novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), hanged himself on 12 September. He was 46.

Joan Winston, US fan who co-organized the first *Star Trek* convention in 1972 and wrote *The Making of the Trek Conventions* (1977), died on 11 September aged 77.

stop press via Michael Moorcock
Barrington J. Bayley (1937–2008) died October 14 from complications following bowel cancer, aged 71. His novels include *The Soul of the Robot* and *The Garments of Caen*. He sold his first stories while in his mid-teens, was a mainstay of *New Worlds* and went on to produce idiosyncratic fiction for *Interzone*.



ILLUSTRATED BY KENN BROWN

EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS

I was five meters down and in the last stage of decompression when it struck. I hadn't seen it coming; I had been looking up at the sun's rays on the face of these olive-tinted alien waters. The thrill of discovery, the freedom of moving weightlessly – that's what I had been thinking of.

Wham. A giant hand reached up from the depths and jerked me down. Valves in my Eustachian tubes compensated for the sudden pressure change as I flailed. I felt a chill wave as my drysuit pumped drugs into me.

I tried to roll and kick myself down to see what had happened, but my balance was off. I saw a dark trail in the water and traced it to the stump where I had just had a right leg.

Fuck. An enormous flat darkness passed below me. It was a carpet of scales with incongruous fins; a Great White run over by a truck. I had been attacked by a Kotanchik's Shark, the largest predator in the galaxy. There shouldn't have been one there. They're deep water. They're territorial. Abunay would have known it. He wouldn't have told me to search here. He... It was coming back. Twenty tons, twenty-five meters, six rows of dull teeth.

I yanked the emergency dangle on my buoyancy compensator. The BC inflated, blasting me straight up to the surface. The bends they can cure, I thought. Death is tougher.

I scrambled for the flare gun and fired wildly into the sky. I pulled the other dangle that spilled fluorescent chemicals and triggered a homing beacon. Where was Abunay's ship? I spat out the regulator as my drug-addled eyes closed in the too-bright sunlight. I heard myself screaming but it was distant, distorted.

Fucked. It struck again. My lower torso was gripped in a door-sized maw. I wanted a weapon but my knife was on my right leg, somewhere in its stomach. It chewed as it swam and I pounded on its wet-leather skin. I slipped and my right arm went into its mouth and came out shorter.

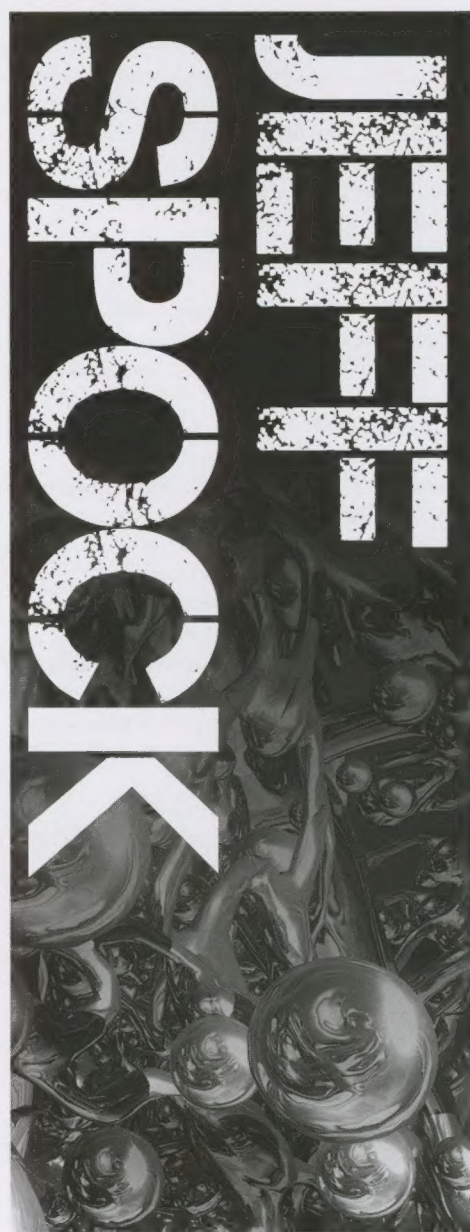
I gagged on the blood-drenched salt water that filled my mask. More technology kicked in. Every closed cell in the drysuit inflated for buoyancy; the edges grew like a fungus to contain my fluids and close ruptures. Nanosyringes in the BC drilled into my aorta to supply oxygen. I was drowning, but the drugs kept me awake.

The beast chewed methodically, working its way through my hipbones and the bottom of my spine.

Not my cock, not my cock, I thought as I felt the nails-on-chalkboard sensation of my own bones being ground by cartilaginous teeth. I felt internal organs rupture; balloons of heat filled with nausea. Batteries fired electrodes to keep my heart beating.

Another chill wave. Trauma drugs turned my rage into melancholic discontent. So sad...

A spacecraft, a Wepper ship, had crashed centuries ago. The government had searched for it but the seas – ninety-five percent of this planet – were too large, and the cost was too high. It had taken Abunay five years and a hell of a lot more money



than the government.

The Kotanchik's finally sawed me in half and my remains shot surface-ward, pulled by the inflated drysuit. I don't know how deep it had dragged me but I spun forever on my way up. The cracked face of my mask splintered.

I popped out, arcing through the air trailing a long streamer of gut. The sun faded.

I wept for my body, my temple. I remembered the adrenaline crack of the sails, windsurfing off Hookipa Beach; the exaggerated scream of the winch pulling me deeper as I free dove off Toulon; the warm currents like breezes that caressed me wreck diving in the Caribbean. The coconut scent of sun tan lotion, the salt sandy bodies of women.

Everything was dark, numb. Electrical charges triggered muscle contractions that would keep oxygenated fluid circulating in my skull. I bobbed, directionless, cursing the drugs that kept me alive, the shark that had taken everything from me, and the investor who had hired me in the first place. For without investors, there are no treasure hunters.

I floated; I dreamt.

Twice now in my life I had felt that rush of discovery, that ball-tingling sensation of glory. The first time was two years ago, on Earth. I had blown off three hundred and fifty years of Mediterranean silt and there, in the light of the spots, the piles of gold bars from the HMS Sussex had gleamed like so many golden fingers. And again, now, the lost Unidentified Extraterrestrial Predecessors' – Weppers' – craft.

Treasure found, but everything else lost...

The smell of technology. Ozone, plastic, disinfectant.

"Jesus Haitch!" Female; concerned.

"Aaaamen. Shark, probably a Kotanchik's – ah! Look at the bite radius." Male; nauseated.

"Brain dead?"

"Of cou– No! Check the suit out."

Sounds of cutting, ripping, smell of burning rubber.

"Great stuff! Fibrillator, pacemaker, oxyboost, integrated compensator, sure as bollocks not Orrin-made. Look at the pharma kit! Shite, that'll be a messy blood sample –"

"We're going to need a spectroscope to –"

"Yeah, yeah. Let's plug 'im up, shall we?"

Tugging, jerking, and strange waves of nausea. I remembered the attack. Sport, sex, even basic mobility – everything was gone. I had no stomach and I wanted to puke. I passed out.

"...did you sy your nime was?"

"Abunay. I'm his next of kin –"

"No he's not," I wanted to say, but couldn't move my jaw or vocal cords.

"– and we're arranging a private clinic."

(No no no!)

"Got the CW-1806 forms?"

Papers shuffle. (I don't trust him!)

"Looks good. Leave your number, we'll contact you in eight, ten days. The MOEA will get the first shot at 'im when he can talk."

Pause.

"Marine and Oceanic? Why?"

"Standard. The poor bastard got nibbled by a Kotanchik's. They'll want to follow up. Marine life management, predator tracking."

Silence.

The doctor with the funny accent was in charge of my case. Australian, she had done her residency on Orrin. I guess she had liked it, because she had gone local in the way that only Orries can. Her hands – and probably her feet – were partially webbed and she had pale, vat-grown skin that would reduce heat loss in the water. I could see rows of rib gills as parallel lines beneath her scrubs, and the shape of thick, strong legs.

"Right, Mr Russo. The lab has grown bone, skin, muscle, and a few meters of ligaments for you. We've managed to clone your internal organs. That's the easy paht."

"What's...hard...part?"

"My part. Neurophysiology. Connecting everything to the brain. Re-wiring the nervous system, basically."

"You can...?"

"We can do a lot, Mr Russo –"

"Pete."

Her translucent skin was both intriguing and repellent. Her hair was grayer than I liked, but she had a killer smile that she did with just a corner of her mouth.

"Okay. Pete. I'm Dr Weber, but call me Maggie. Here's the deal. You'll certainly walk again. Eating, basic body functions...all that should come back."

"What about...what about..."

"Plenty of time to worry about the rest later."

Abunay came to visit. Charcoal gray suit with platinum pinstripes, collarless cobalt-blue shirt, matching platinum cufflinks. His skin was pale but everything else was dark.

"Good afternoon, Mr Russo."

"Mmph."

"How are you feeling?"

"Mmph." Thanks to painkillers, I mostly felt warm.

"The MOEA will want to see you. We should...come to an understanding."

"You want...lie to them?"

He adjusted his shirt cuffs and looked up at the hexagonal white tiles of the ceiling that were iridescent with nanosilver disinfectant. I stared at them too, but because I had to – no stomach muscles. He turned to me.

"Did you find it?" His voice was a library whisper.

"Not...question. Question is...can find again? Yes...not where you thought."

His hands clenched, then relaxed. "Very well. How –"

"You...not...next of kin." I stopped; it was exhausting.

He nodded, slowly, then pulled a chair next to the bed.

"I have learned about you since your accident, Mr Russo." He was whispering, close to my ear. "You're not some danger junkie beach bum. You found the Sussex."

"So...don't need your money."

He grinned this awful grin; all teeth and no humor.

"Incorrect. So far, the medical work has cost six hundred and forty thousand. And you know what? You were diving without permission or a valid licence, using uncertified equipment." He put his lips right next to my ear. "Your insurance doesn't cover this. I do. Or I don't."

I shivered. Suddenly it felt cold in the room, and the effort required to concentrate drained me.

"Why should I hide...info...from Marine and –"

"You will have a common room. A different doctor. You will be a charity case. Cheap materials, quick fix. What kind of body do you want to spend the rest of your life in, Mr Russo?"

I closed my eyes.

"Working alone," I said, "...attacked...no reports of Kotanchik's... looking for cinder coral... Wuchte's abalone."

I waited for his reply, but when I opened my eyes I was alone.

Maggie removed the bandages from the epiderm on my right forearm, then stepped back.

Blood pulsed deep red under the clear skin. I had become quality tenderloin. I watched the muscles and tendons work as I twisted my wrist and moved the fingers. In a way it was cool; mostly it was repulsive.

"How's that?" she asked.

"It works." I turned away from her. I had to get used to being ugly, and that was better done alone.

"Hey, that's okay," she said. "It's a hard thing to do -"

"No, no...I'm...it's fine."

She left and I was lying in bed, squeezing a blue rubber ball, when two MOEA agents came in. A tall woman named Odenny, and a short man named Chusagi. Both had Orrie modifications and wore green shirts with the MOEA fin-and-trident on the pocket.

We shook hands, though in my case it was more like fondling. The pleasantries were brief.

"Mr Russo," she said, "you have our sympathies. We understand that you have suffered a terrible trauma."

I gave her my best, "Mmph."

"It's our job to follow up on marine accidents, and as we understand it you were diving without permits or licenses. MOEA takes this sort of thing very seriously."

"I have done over fifteen hundred dives," I said, and let that sink in. The number was astronomical for a guy my age, even for a professional. "I have done free diving down to eighty meters. I have worked as a commercial diver and in commercial salvage."

They were listening and nodding, concentrating on me while recording the conversation.

"Then you, of all people, should have known better," said the little guy.

"I did know better!" They were acting like the shark was the victim, not me. "How many people in the whole fucking galaxy could have come up alive, huh? How many would have had the technology and experience and conditioning?"

"If you want our congratulations, you got 'em," said Odenny. "But we're more interested in what you were doing -"

"Looking for cinder coral, okay? And Wuchte's abalone, if there are any along the shelf. But I have a question for you guys. Where the fuck did the Kotanchik's come from? They're territorial, right? Deep water? I was at forty, fifty meters. Believe me, if I'd thought there was a Kotanchik's around I sure as hell would have stayed away." I remembered the slimy feel of its skin and my new hand spasmed.

"We agree on the Kotanchik's. We want to figure out why the attack happened. We have their ranges marked; the nearest one should have been, oh, six kilometers away."

I sat back. Fine. Let them go pester the damn fish.

"Mr Russo, please just answer our question. What were -"

"Cinder coral. Wuchte's abalone."

We regarded each other for a few seconds.

"Mr Russo," started Chusagi, "can you tell us about the relationship you have with Mr Abunay?"

I blinked. "He and I, we have, uh, discussed salvage."

More waiting. Cops do that everywhere; try to make you uncomfortable with silence.

"Could you tell us more?"

I shook my head.

"You didn't deal with him when you worked on the Sussex?"

"Huh? He's always been here on Orrin, right?"

"One of his companies is called Aqueous. You probably used their equipment."

I had, in fact. They made state-of-the-art sonar, radio, and underwater signaling gear. "Really? Aqueous? Sure, we used some of their stuff. I didn't know it was his."

We waited some more. Companionable.

"Nothing else to say?" they asked. I shook my head.

"My partner looks stupid, Pete, but I'm not." That was Odenny. Chusagi rolled his eyes. "The only thing that Abunay cares about is finding that Wepper ship. If you're in on it you need to remember one thing. He does not like to lose; he does not like to share."

I shrugged. "Two things."

Chusagi snorted. "Look, Mr Russo, we're not the bad guys. We don't want to see you get hurt."

"What?" I laughed, which ripped some of my new stomach muscles and set off the painkillers. "You're a few days too late for that, huh?"

They were annoyed, but I was too drugged to care. After a whispered conversation they got up to leave. Odenny paused at the door. "Stay in touch, Mr Russo. Sooner or later we may look like the best bet for a losing hand."

"Mmph."

I got the nurse to bring me the remains of my suit and BC, and spent some time picking through them. I wondered what I had taken on that dive. The drysuit was mine, a custom job from a shop in Antibes. But the BC had been Abunay's, and one of his site beacons was still attached to it. Everything was slick - blood, guts, and mucus or saliva from the shark. It stank. I bagged it and sent it as a CARE package to Odenny.

I was using a walker to work my way across the room; a whole host of filaments and sensors ran from my neck to a ceiling track. They hadn't gotten to my skin yet, so I looked like a walking anatomy textbook.

After four meters I had to stop. Legs, chest, stomach, back - everything hurt.

"How's...that...Maggie?"

She smiled. "Great stuff. You're the stah patient. This is unbelievable for six weeks. It's lucky you were in such good shape beforehand."

"Good shape?" I tried to laugh but I couldn't avoid the anger. "I was a fucking god. Shit, my right leg hurts."

She was working on a tablet, drawing and dotting with the stylo as she regarded the monitors and the holograms of my nervous system. The pain eased.

"Feel bitter?"

"Of course I'm bitter. That fucking fish ate my life! I'm geriatric, a geek, a gomer. I -"

"No, bet-ter," she said. "Feel bet-ter?"

Where I had skin I blushed. "Uh, yeah."

"Good," she said, looking at me. "Look, there's something you might want to think about. It's the perfect time. Have you thought about Orrie enhancements? Chest gills, heat conservation -"

"A Fishhead? You think I want to be a fucking fish?" I leaned heavily on the wall. "It's bad enough that I look like the garbage bin behind a butcher shop. You think -" The look in her face made me stop. White skin glowed pink.

I closed my eyes. "Shit. I didn't mean – it's just that I lost everything. All I want is to get back as much as I can."

She ran some more tests. Every set of muscles from my scalp to my toes flexed, one after the other. Weird. Her mouth was an angry thin line.

"Pete, it's time to think about this. You have to face it. You won't have what you had before. Never." I stared at the floor.

She walked over, grabbed my head with both hands, turned it, made me look at her. It hurt my neck.

"Say it in the mirror. Accept it. You will never be the same. You are going to be different."

She let my head go. "The question you need to answer is this: If you're going to be something else, what do you want to be?"

She finished checking me and left, offended. I worked my way back to the bed and fell on it.

I hadn't considered the adaptations. It made sense – I could never face Zoé or Junko or Katrina in this Frankenstein body. Ditto the Cadiz Mafia – the gang that dove with me on the Sussex. Everything that I ever was had been ruined. Chewed, digested, shat out. Earth was nothing but faded memories of a life that was definitively over.

I had no interest in being Pete, the rebuilt freak show from Orrin. But the thought of Pete, who grew up in the sea and could now spend hours in it – that was something new. Something amazing.

I felt a weird feeling there, that I hadn't felt in a while, and I dozed off pondering it.

I felt hope.

.....
When I woke up Abunay was there again.

"Mr Russo."

"In the flesh. Visibly."

"Are you in a mood to talk about things?"

"Things...?"

"The bill is over a million dollars now. My philanthropy only goes so far."

"First, let's discuss Wepper ships."

He shot out his cuffs, played with his cuff links.

"Wepper ships have camouflage. Not visual, like a chameleon, but electromagnetic. If you go looking for them with radar, or an electromagnetic pulse, the ship registers the direction and frequency of your incoming signal. Knowing what its background looks like, the ship returns a signal on the same frequency – with a picture of that background. All you'll see is the ground or the stars behind it. Simple, efficient, effective. Easily done with quantum computing. Understood?"

I nodded.

"But they can't camouflage themselves against vision. It's passive; there's no incoming signal. So the way to find the ship that crashed on Orrin is to try to guess where your signal has been faked, and then send a dive team down."

"Why not cameras?"

"They need batteries, maybe...who knows. They don't work. If they did, you and I would never have met."

"And wouldn't that be sad."

He made a dismissive gesture. "Let me ask you something, Mr Russo. Why didn't you drop the beacons?"

He had asked me to do that – several times – when I sighted the wreck.

"I was off the edge. No point dropping them in a thousand meters of water. So what? You know where I was. Why don't *you* go take a look?"

He leaned closer.

"You see my eyes? These eyes." He opened them wide, staring at me. "Eight million dollars. I can see from ultraviolet to infrared. Read your pulse, your blood flow. They're lie detectors. *Nobody* reads people like me." He stood up, kicking the chair aside. "Nobody can touch me in a conference room, in a board presentation. I own every negotiation before it even begins. I read an audience the way you read the waves."

He put a finger to one eye and tapped on it. I flinched for him.

"But they're active. I can't see a Wepper ship."

I nodded. "Still one question though."

"Yes?"

"Why the Kotanchik's?"

"I wish I knew. I'm paying three marine biologists to figure it out."

Hmmmm. So he says.

"Mr A, would you be willing to front the cost of my getting Orrie adaptations?"

He didn't need to reply; I saw the gleam in his eye. "Why, Mr Russo, what a novel idea. What an expensive idea."

I waved my hand. "You can take it out of my share."

"So you want me to fund this in exchange for what is currently ten percent of nothing."

"Oh, it's fifty percent of something." We smiled at each other. I watched as his pupils dilated, shrank, turned iridescent.

"Very well. Here's to a profitable partnership."

We shook hands, and he left.

I sighed, loud and long. The adaptations made sense. Maggie was right. After that meeting with the Kotanchik's everything was going to be different anyway. If I became a Fishhead it could be, just maybe, in some ways, even better.

I had never before been in a place as amazing as that goddamned hospital.

.....
Three days later Maggie brought in a specimen transport box the size of a small suitcase. I was sitting up, mastering the herculean task of eating fish steak with a knife and fork. My fingers slipped on the knife, and ached doing it. I didn't notice her at first, because I was reading a note from Odenny about the beacon Abunay had given me to mark the site.

"Why are you grinning?" I asked.

She flipped open the catches and gave me a peek inside. Refrigerated in the moist foam was a penis.

"Used to be bigger," I said, hope leaping within me.

"Not according to your DNA," she said, smiling. She lowered my bed to horizontal. Two people dressed in scrubs came in, wheeling equipment. Disinfectant misted the room. "But you can keep the catheter if you prefer."

"Very funny. Look, Maggie, I've been thinking."

"Mmm?" Her mind was elsewhere as she prepared her computers and filaments.

"I think...I'd...like to try the enhancements."

Those nimble fingers, so adept with fiber optics and probes, paused. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Well, we can start with the gills – they're the most important, and take the longest. Insurance won't cover it."

"That's okay," I said. "For the moment, anyway."

"Great stuff." She nodded abruptly, pausing in the preparations for stapling my dick back on. She looked at me. "Great," she said again, quietly.

It felt stapled. For three days the pain was excruciating. Maggie said that she could deaden some of the nerves, but that sounded like a bad idea. When the pain eased they went to work on my chest. Which also hurt.

In a moment between bouts of surgery I called Odenny.

"We were hoping to hear from you. What's up?"

"The Kotanchik's. They're sort of tribal, right? How do they communicate?"

"Huh. Well, loose family groups. They hunt things that are bigger than they are."

I shuddered; she kept talking.

"They use ultra low frequency – ULF – waves. They can't speak quickly, but they can do it over kilometers of ocean. There's lots of info on the MOEA site."

"I'll check it out. But I still have a question. Big question. Why was it there? Could Abunay have called it?"

She pondered for a few seconds. "Huh. Hard to say. I guess it's not technically impossible, but linguistically... All I can say is maybe. Or let me put it this way. When you find out, let us know."

"Thanks a ton –"

"Hey! One other thing. Where did you cross the haapala?"

"The what?"

"It's like a free-drifting anemone. A haapala. Looks like a big shaggy blond wig. Kotanchik's adore them. You had secretions from it all over your BC."

Ah.

"Yeah, maybe... I came in from the trench to the shelf – maybe that's where I crossed it." Like hell. I had seen nothing at all like that, unless the trauma had really screwed up my memory. "Could you send me a sample of the stuff?"

"Sure."

"Thanks. By the way, where do you guys stand on this?" I asked. "Discovery, salvage?"

"The law on salvage ops is crystal clear. It has to be declared, and permits have to be filed."

"Sounds simple."

"Let me shatter your illusions. Ownership of the Orrin seas is a technical nightmare. Have you ever seen a map of an electoral district? Insanely chopped up little blocks of real estate? It's like that, but in three dimensions. No. Actually four dimensions – it changes over time."

"Well, what if a lone diver, casually swimming about, comes across something?"

I could hear her smile. "They come back, fill out the forms, and get their fair share."

"So I throw myself on the mercy and charity of the government?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

Actually, I didn't.

When the procedures were finally finished I decided to ask her out. "Maggie."

"Hmmm?" She was in charts and technology mode, testing the flex and control of my newly-webbed toes.

"I want to celebrate. How about dinner one of these nights? You and I?"

She pretended to be doing something but her stylo had stopped; I couldn't see anything beyond her gray hair because her head was bent forward.

"Let me think." She paused. "You like barbecue?"

"Do I? I love it. Can the stomach handle it?"

"We'll see. Your schedule's fairly open, right?"

"Sure, as long as the doctor lets me leave."

"Tomorrow?"

"Super." Hot damn. A date.

Like most Orries, Maggie had an underwater apartment. The lobby had an entry airlock and lots of glass. I descended in a transparent elevator whose lights illuminated the gray-green water. Clouds of glittering flea-like creatures chased the lights; larger things that looked like finned yellow scorpions came to feed on them.

"Wow," I found myself thinking, "what a beautiful planet."

She greeted me at the door of her apartment, wearing a green knit dress and not much else. She seemed shorter and stockier than she did at the hospital, but rounder and more feminine, too. She stood on her tiptoes to give me a brief kiss and I felt, for the first time in ages, a stirring in my crotch.

"Please please please," I thought to myself.

I had brought a bottle of champagne, and after half a glass had to sit on the couch.

"New liver," she said, smiling. "It'll take some time."

Mild as it was the sauce on the fish was still too hot for me, and I had to scrape it off while she laughed. I regaled her with stories of a Thai beef salad in Bangkok so hot that it made me hallucinate.

"Not medically possible," she said.

"Just wait. When I'm back up to speed I'll make it for you."

After dinner she had a brandy while I just sat on the couch, letting my stomach work. On the TV was a looping picture of Maggie with a guy, laughing in bathing suits on a beach. It seemed so alien, this vision of white sand and blue sky and yellow sun and tan skin and colorful clothing. My world was only white and green and gray.

"Who's he?"

She looked at the picture, her head cocked. "I'm not sure that I know anymore," she said.

"Where does he live?"

"On Earth. He's there, and I'm here."

"Really? Where on Earth?"

"He's there," she repeated. "I'm here."

I figured that it was a good time to shut up. I turned my attention to the picture window. The balcony was an artificial coral reef and we lay back on the couch, watching the fish in all their flickering beauty.

I kissed her slowly and carefully, the coolness of our Orrie skins and lips fascinating and new. The dense muscle of her Orrie-enhanced thighs was firm and sleek; I thought of seals and mermaids. We undressed, hurriedly and awkwardly. I wasn't used to moving like that but I was willing to put up with the pain.

I went down on her, and she on me. To no avail. We tried body massages, hand lotion, and even inserting my limp dick into her. None of it worked. My cock sat flaccid, uninterested; no amount of joy or desire seemed to interest it. She still seemed to have fun, and held me afterwards. I thought she was asleep when I started crying, but I guess I woke her.

"God's sake, Pete, don't worry about it."

"Easy for you to say."

"Shut up. I know these things – I'm the doctor. It's a pretty complicated combination – hormone, muscle, erectile tissue, emotions... It'll take some time for your body to sort all that out."

"Huh."

"Huh back at you. Look, it would have been something close to a medical miracle if it had worked. But it should work. It will work. We – you just need time."

I watched a fish that looked like a metallic green shuriken arc

past the window. "How long?"

"Three months? Six?"

"Six more months in the hospital? Fuck, I don't think I can –"

"Forget the hospital. I'll release you tomorrow. Do you have anywhere to go?"

I thought she might offer that I come to her place, and I didn't want that. Or, more accurately, I wanted it more than anything else, but not until hot water circulated in my plumbing.

"Yeah, I have a place to go," I said, thinking over options. "Don't worry about me."

She snuggled her head in against my neck and said something that sounded like, "I might anyway."

I left the hospital the next evening by taxi, after a final set of check-ups. It bobbed away from the dome of the hospital complex, then lifted on hydrofoils and raced off to a v-shaped pattern of lights at the edge of town – Abunay's villa.

His set-up made the most modern hospital on Orrin look antiquated. I had a private room, a private physical therapist, and a doctor. I swam four times a day as I worked my strength back up and practiced with the gills. In between those sessions I walked through virtuality maps of the area that I had been diving in, triggering memories. I studied sea life, currents, charts. I was in my element.

It was a surprise and pleasure when Maggie called.

"Hey, how are you?" I asked. "I was going to call you...after..."

"After you went and did something really stupid. You're not ready."

"Hey, it's my life. Don't tell me what I can't do."

"Look you idiot, I am not only your doctor, but about the only person on the planet who gives a damn about your welfare. Your therapy's not finished."

"I'm doing it here. The medical facility –"

"I'm sure it's top-notch. But how do you know that the doctors will say you're ready based on your condition, and not Abunay's demands? Can you trust them?" Her voice was not just angry, but worried and uneasy.

"What? He'd never –"

"Of course he would."

"Okay. You're right. He would."

"And me? You trust me?"

"Of course I do. Absolutely. Still, we shouldn't have..." She let me hang out there, waiting to hear what I would say. Hardass. "Look, it didn't work out. I'm sorry."

"What didn't work out?"

"You know what I mean. The old purple-helmeted love soldier slept through reveille."

"Jesus. Guys. Look, I had a nice night. I would even do it again some time. That whole part...that's not the most... Shite." Her voice was wavery – not at all Maggie.

I had absolutely nothing to say, so I said it. I heard her take a deep breath.

"Pete?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm here."

"Take care. Will I...will you be back to the hospital for a check-up?"

"Yeah. Of course," I said. Her words finally sunk in. "Really?"

"Yes. Bye."

I hung up the phone and wandered in a daze along shag-carpeted hallways that smelled like Mediterranean herbs. I understood nothing. Not me, not Maggie, not what I had or hadn't lost. Zero.

But somebody had figured out something, because Abunay caught up to me about an hour later. I was standing at an undersea window, watching a flock of rays glide past. They looked like birds, flying and banking with liquid ease.

"Dr Burke informs me that you're ready to dive."

I didn't have to feign enthusiasm. "It's about time. When do we go?"

"Tomorrow. We'll take the launch out to where you – out to the site."

I slept badly, and the day dawned gray. We left after breakfast on a hydrofoil launch that required no crew. I thought about Maggie, but also about Odenny's words. Only Abunay and I would know where the site was.

An hour or so later we hove to, bucking in the waves. Abunay accompanied me down to the tail of the launch – real actual teak from Earth – and watched me prepare.

I pulled on drysuit leggings over thermal underwear. A custom jacket, open over the rib cage, went on next. Then my weight belt, a new knife, several pouches of gear, and the fins. Abunay held out a BC, identical to the one I had worn before. I pulled out a bottle that contained the haapala extract from Odenny.

"Kotanchik's repellent," I said. "Got it from the MOEA." I smeared it all over my BC. "Where's your BC? When you come down you'll want to be protected." He was regarding me, carefully. I turned away from those eyes and slipped the BC on. My jaw clenched as I thought of what I was going to do.

"Come on!" I said. "Gimme your damned BC. You don't want to risk this."

He pulled it out of a built-in locker that was a perfect, seamless white, and handed it to me slowly. I grabbed it and smeared on the extract.

"You can thank me later if this saves your life."

I checked the camera clipped to the BC's left shoulder and the beacons to mark the site.

"See you in an hour, a billion bucks richer," I said as I forced a smile.

We nodded good-byes and I stepped to the ladder. The water was cold, colder than the sea near his villa where I had been practicing, but it felt great – salty, invigorating. I put on my mask. As the sea rose to my torso I began to move my new sets of secondary muscles. A cool, clean flavor spread across my chest as I began to gillbreathe. *Righteous*. Abunay handed me a communications filament and I attached it to the suit. Thread-thin and essentially unbreakable, it would network all of my gear with the yacht.

I put in the regulator and fell backwards. More fish than man I ignored the drive to breathe, letting the gills do the work. I pulled the sea sled off the fantail and flicked a switch. The electric motor whirled to life. Silent, motionless, breathless, I descended.

It was cold, and darker than I remembered. I dropped through a school of gold-scaled flatfish who formed a frightened bagel around me then zipped off. Great sheets of algae marked a thermocline at twenty-five meters, and masses of little crab-like creatures swarmed on them. In the light of my lamp they looked violet and yellow.

I checked my GPS and depth gauge. Lower I went, into darkness, where I stopped even the occasional breaths from my regulator. I let it trail behind me, unwanted, as I gilled the oxygen-rich waters. I already trusted Maggie's adaptations more than the technology that I had been using all my life.

I saw fluorescence which meant that I was near the bottom; near the shelf where the sea floor dropped from seventy meters to

hundreds and thousands. Luminous plants and the animals that lived on them thrived there, in the mingling of cooler and warmer waters.

Visibility was good but not great – about ten meters. The fissures and rocks were unfamiliar. I checked the compass and the GPS again and swam east. It took fifteen minutes to find a hand-shaped rock formation that I remembered. The sled pulled me around the far side.

Bang, there it was.

Years of sea growth had covered the zeppelin-like form with strange appendages. It was twenty meters in diameter by sixty in length. Vanes and fins of inexplicable purpose spiked out; two fat tubes hung from the cylindrical body over the side of the shelf and down into unfathomable depths. Suspended between awe and glory, it took me a long time to hear the crackle of the phone, fed down the filament that trailed behind me.

"Is it there? Have you found it?"

I put in my regulator so I could speak to him. "I'm still looking," I said.

"But you're on the bottom."

He knew exactly where I was.

"Hold on."

"Drop the beacons and turn on the camera. Drop the damned beacons!"

"If you insist." I nestled the sea sled next to one of the fins, then planted a beacon at either end of the craft. The beacons were the key – they marked the site but also interfered with the Wepper camouflage. As soon as the second beacon was down strange noises emanated from the speakers nestled into my hood.

"Oh...oh...ohhhh. So...beautiful. It's enormous. Enormous! Bigger than the station they found on Adonis III's moon! Oh! Ohhhh..." This went on as I swam, looking for the Kotanchik's.

"Oh my. Ohhh... Yes. Oh. Um, Mr Russo. Could you take a swim around the perimeter? I'd like to get clear images of the craft from all angles."

I tried to remember how long I had been down last time before the shark had arrived. I hurried to finish the tour.

"Well done, Mr Russo. Brilliantly done. The investment in your rehabilitation has been amply repaid. Do you mind collecting a few samples? I'd like to run some tests on them."

I was sure he had lots of meaningless tasks to keep me busy until the beast got there. Even so, I was staying. This was not scientific, or financial. This was personal.

I swam, breathing through my gills. Something that looked like an inflated blowfish drifted by on the current. I couldn't identify eyes or a mouth. I followed its path over the wreck as it bounced and drifted aimlessly in the direction of the city, fifty or so kilometers away.

I turned my head back to look over the shelf. The Kotanchik's was there. It had come from the north, out where the ocean went deep and black. In the limited light of the ambient fluorescence its mouth was a great black tooth-lined semi-circle, coming for me.

Not this time.

I doused the camera as I kicked and moved out of its attack line. "Sorry Mr A," I said. "Snagged the camera."

The head seemed to fold and the rest of the body followed in its path as if around some invisible obstacle. I kicked again, and it followed again. There were now two folds in the body, and the long lateral fins moved as the body followed precisely in the course set by the head – straight across the wreck, then up, then sideways.

It was long, fluid, and beautiful; it turned corners like a ribbon. I could never imagine beauty to be so terrifying.

"Mr Russo, is everything okay?"

"Just fine," I gasped. I had the advantage of two oxygen sources – gills and regulator. The way I was swimming I needed both.

"No sign of...danger?" he asked innocently.

I was too busy to answer. It looked like a good guess that Abunay's beacons had summoned the Kotanchik's. Combined with the haapala secretions on the BC it was as close to a death warrant as you could concoct on Orrin.

I kept swimming, taking sharp angles, kicking as hard and as fast as I could, my new legs boosted by the best fins that money could buy. I felt the scales of the shark brushing my calf, removing a layer of skin. I turned, it turned. Another fold.

"Nope. Coming down?"

"What? You're sure?"

"Twenty-five meters?" Short sentences. Breathe. "Billion teeth?" Breathe. "Not here."

Kick. Not fast enough. Shit. *Kick*. Angle around a stalk of coral, through a too-small hole. Enormous gash down my right arm. *Fold*. The Kotanchik's couldn't follow so it angled up, to the side, looking for a new trajectory.

"I'll come up if you don't want to –"

"Wait!" The ultimate bait. No way he wouldn't take it. I checked the gauges. Yup. He was on his way down, following the communications filament. My feeling of triumph was cut short by something jagged touching my leg. Fuck. *Kick*. It got a piece of my swim fin. I lost power, and the gouge in my fin made me cut a sudden arc when I kicked. It missed me.

Fold.

One arm at a time I shrugged out of the BC and the tank, then jerked the emergency inflation dongle and punched the panic button that would reel the communication filament back to the launch. The whole bundle snapped upwards on an angle.

Kick. Muscle cramp. I spun into a ball.

Fold. That mouth came into view, gaping wide, and suddenly I was calm. I had rolled the dice, and it came up snake eyes. That's life. Well, at least this time I had my knife. I pulled it, ready to take a piece of shark with me.

Fold. It followed the bundle with the BC.

I kicked after it with my good leg. I could dimly see the bundle, when suddenly the Kotanchik's turned away from it.

What? I was so sure that –

A jagged scream that went on and on broke through the speakers. I stopped swimming. The Kotanchik's disappeared from my sight, like some flat javelin on a perfect trajectory.

I gave myself slight negative buoyancy, drifting back down to my sled by the wreck. The noise in the speakers had stopped by the time I arrived. I slapped medical tape on my arm and leg. Damn Orrie skin sloughs off too easily.

I took a few deep gills, letting the oxygen and the cool water calm me down. About forty-five, fifty kilometers, I figured. It would make for a few cold hours even with the sled, and the odds weren't necessarily in my favor, but I didn't care. I'd make a stop at the MOEA to report the wreck, and then, well... As long as I could work out things with Maggie, I'd have everything that matters.

Jeff Spock is a full-time writer of video games and speculative fiction. He attended the Clarion West Writers' Workshop in 2004, previous to which he spent over fifteen years in the computer industry always wondering if there was something more fun out there. He currently resides in the south of France. Visit his website at jeffspock.com.

JASON SANFORD

WHEN THORNS ARE THE TIPS OF TREES



ILLUSTRATED BY VINCENT CHONG



As I walked the heat-cracked sidewalk in front of Seanna's house, she surprised me by blowing a kiss from her bedroom window – a kiss I knew she'd never actually give. Even though I was mad at her mother for forbidding Seanna from seeing me, I blew a kiss back, only to have her mother evil-eye me from their garden. I ignored the look and kept walking. Seanna's mom had hated me ever since I held her daughter's hand last month. Never mind that Seanna and I had both been wearing gloves at the time, meaning I hadn't technically touched her skin.

When Dad heard of me holding hands, he'd stayed calm and muttered about raging teenage hormones. But to be prudent, the next morning he drove me to the town's pharmacy, where the Doc doubled my weekly dose of inhibitor. "Better safe than stiff," Dad said with a smirk.

But I didn't have time to worry about Seanna or her mom or even my dad's lame sexual innuendos; the sun was setting and it wasn't safe to stay out after dark.

Seanna's was the last maintained house on the block. Just down the street pine trees and kudzu sprawled across abandoned lawns and burned-out homes. Amid all this green lay the ruins of Brad's house. The old swing set we played on as kids was tipped over in the corner of the front yard, the reds and blues of its molded polymers faded away and small pines growing through the frame. The clubhouse we built in the oak tree hung half rotten, the tree itself almost buried in a sea of kudzu vines. I sneaked around to the backyard, where the grass looked like prairie and the second story windows broken by last year's hail storm still hadn't been replaced.

The only place the weeds and kudzu and pines hadn't invaded was the small well-trimmed spot in the middle of the backyard where a single thorn tree grew.

The lights were on in Brad's house and I watched his father's silhouette pace around the living room. I figured he was too drunk to notice me, but when I tried sneaking into the yard Brad's old German Sheppard barked and chased me back out. But then the dog recognized me. "Sarge?" I whispered. Sarge padded over and whined as he licked my face. He then walked back to the thorn tree and laid down under its scraggy branches.

I sneaked across the yard and crouched behind the thorn tree. The tree – two meters tall, with silver branches and needles crooking left and right like frozen lightning – was sickly and dangerously thin. When I pulled off my gloves and grabbed a needle, it shattered with a musical chime. Sarge whined from the dusty groove beside the tree trunk, where he obviously spent most of his time.

Being more careful, I pushed my index finger onto another needle. A drop of blood ran into the needle as cold rushed through my veins.

"Hello Miles," Brad said, emerging from the fog of too much time alone. "Do I even want to know how long it's been since your last visit?"

"Two months," I said, feeling both guilty and relieved that Brad still seemed so fresh. Too often thorns' memories and personalities stiffened and decayed if they were left alone for long periods of time.

Brad laughed at my guilt and relief, the same high-pitched cackle he'd used when we were kids. Not, of course, that I actually heard him. When talking to thorns, it was best to keep your eyes closed. That way your mind turned the thoughts and feeling to words. With eyes closed, the person might almost be sitting next to you.

Almost.

"So what made you finally visit?" Brad asked.

I started to make up some excuse, but it's pointless to lie to a thorn. Brad knew I hated seeing him in this situation. "Elleen was mad at me," I finally confessed. "Wouldn't speak to me unless I checked on you."

Brad smiled. No one really cared for him anymore. His mother moved away last

year – wanting to be near the safety of a big city – and his father drank too much and barely got by. “He only talks to me when he’s almost comatose. I can taste the alcohol in his blood. Never tells me about his life; just jabs his hand over and over on my needles.”

For a moment I opened my eyes and glanced at the living room window, where Brad’s father sat drinking a beer. As I shifted, the needle in my finger broke. I pulled the tip out of my skin and found another needle to impale myself on. “You’re really brittle,” I said.

“The water was cut off a while back. Dad can’t pay the bill.”

I cursed. I should have checked on him before this, what with the drought we’ve been having. I told Brad to wait, then grabbed an old bucket and sneaked back to Seanna’s house. Seanna’s mom was inside but the sprinkler in her garden still ran. I filled the bucket and returned to Brad, flooding his roots. Sarge whined and climbed out of his hole; before the water washed in I thought I saw the glint of bones there, but I refused to look close enough to find out.

I made several more trips before Brad had enough water, then stabbed my finger again. Even though the sun was setting and I needed to get home, I opened my memories to the story Elleen had created just for Brad, a haunted tale of lovers kept from one another by cruel fate. Brad cried in my mind as he listened. Even though I’d heard many of Elleen’s stories, this was her best yet. When I was done, Brad thanked me and said to give his best to Elleen.

When I reached home, I wanted to tell Elleen how much Brad had loved the story. However, it was already nighttime and shrieks and perverse giggles rose from the fields behind our house. Not daring to find out what waited in that dark, I rushed inside and locked the door behind me.

The next day I worked with my dad, tossing bags of mulch and manure off the back of our flatbed truck as the sun climbed hot into the sky. We were landscaping the memorial grove in the rich part of town. Even though it was still morning, the heat swamped me as I sweated through my long-sleeve shirt and gloves. I’d strip them off in a second if we were home. But people in this part of town would freak if I showed skin and Dad might lose this job. Couldn’t risk that with work so hard to come by.

After I finished unloading, my dad patted me on the back – a rare touch, even in his gloves – and told me to work on the trees in this area. He’d drive to the other side of the grove and deal with matters there. I nodded knowingly. Mrs Blondheim, the fanatical town matriarch whose money maintained this grove, had complained about two new trees from thorn die who’d sneaked into the park last week. She wanted them removed. I hated killing thorn trees, so my father always handled that chore.

After my dad drove off, I added the mulch around the tree trunks and dragged fresh bags deeper into the grove until I couldn’t see anything except the glow of hundreds of silver trunks and branches and thorns. All the trees were at their full growth of two meters, a height they’d achieved in the explosion of growth right after death. Near the center of the grove, I accidentally brushed against an old tree and a thorn stabbed through my shirt. Jackie, a cute-faced nine-year-old who’d turned thorn several decades ago, said hello. The foggiest of her thoughts

told me no one had talked to her in years. Not wanting to be rude, I held my bleeding arm against her long enough to say hello back.

“Have you seen my doll anywhere?” she asked. “Mom gave it to me on her last visit. She’ll be mad if I lose it.”

I didn’t know what to say. How do you explain to a child who can’t grow up, or even change, that her mother was long dead? That the doll had existed only in her mother’s mind and, with her mother gone, there’s no way to find it. Because of the thorn connection, for the briefest of moments Jackie seemed to understand what I was thinking. “My mother’s not dead,” she cried, before the built up static of a hundred years returned her to the fresh-faced nine-year-old she’d been moments before. “Have you seen my doll?” she asked as innocently as before.

“No,” I told her gently. “But I’ll keep an eye out.” I then pulled my arm away and wiped off the blood before returning to work.

At lunchtime, I sat down in the middle of the grove and ate my sandwich. The wind blew through the silver trees to the sound of a thousand begging whispers, but I resisted the urge to talk to any of them. I thought about visiting Mom’s tree, but decided to wait until I was off work in case Mrs Blondheim came by. Mom turned thorn when I was nine. Even though we hadn’t the money to put her in a fancy grove like this, the thought of Mom growing here had obsessed me. Dad tried to tell me that Mom was dead; that her thorn tree was merely an echo of Mom’s soul. But I begged him without stop for days until he made a deal with Mrs Blondheim, trading a cut in his pay in return for her taking Mom’s tree. At the time I’d been thrilled. Now, I wonder if I did the right thing.

I also wondered about the people who’d created the phage responsible for all this. A few fanatics like Mrs Blondheim still praised the gened virus’s creators for giving beauty and eternal life to our world. Most, though, cursed them as simple environmental terrorists. Whatever the intention, the phage had removed the most basic aspect of human culture – touch. Almost 90% of humanity carried the phage, but it was only activated if you touched someone with the same phage combination. Since the phage continually changed versions like a madly spinning lock, the odds that touching any one person would turn you thorn were not extremely high. However, a person you could safely touch one day might be untouchable the next.

I thought about Seanna. Despite the treatments my father gave me, I wanted so bad to touch her. To hold her. To kiss her. If we married, maybe we could afford to be tested to find a safe day or two in which to touch. If she bore my child, it would be safe for her to touch the baby as long as she breast fed the child and shared the same phage combinations, but I wouldn’t be allowed such tenderness. Maybe someday my child and I could be tested so we could share a hug like my father and I did after Mom died. But as I constructed my life to come, I shook my head. The people who made this curse deserved the worst hell humanity could ever create.

Maybe that was their intention.

I finished my work by four and drove home with Dad, trying not to notice the crystalline dust coating his pants. He hated killing thorns and would probably retire to the living room tonight to watch old movies and drink whiskey.

After dinner, I checked the solar panels on the roof and the batteries in the basement, then reset the motion detectors and fluorescents. Once everything checked okay, and with darkness still an hour away, I figured I had enough time to visit Elleen. I grabbed my shotgun and told Dad I'd be back by sunset.

Elleen grew at the far end of our land, just past the corn and wheat fields. Unlike most thorn trees, her crystalline limbs shone with a faint blue hue. While Elleen and I had been friends since childhood, I'd only gotten to know her after she and Brad ran away at age 13. Brad returned nine months later, infected and nearing his end. No one knew where Elleen was until I found her tree growing on our property. She later told me she'd been trying to reach Brad when her guts exploded and she fell to the dirt, screaming and begging for more time.

I sat beneath Elleen's limbs, closed my eyes, and eased my palm onto a thorn. She suddenly appeared beside me, smiling, then leaned over and hugged me. While I knew the forbidden touch existed only in my mind, I still shivered with excitement. I was also amazed at how clear the connection with Elleen was. She rarely showed the foggiest most thorns fell into after a few hours alone. Even my father, who refused to talk to any thorns – including Mom – had said hello to Elleen once, remarking later that she was indeed different. He'd also noticed that a few of Elleen's thorns still appeared to be growing, something most thorn trees stop doing shortly after their first burst of creation.

"How's Brad?" she asked.

I opened my memories of Brad. Elleen frowned when she saw that Brad's father hadn't been watering him. Thorn trees needed more water than ordinary trees to survive; since the drought began I'd hauled water to Elleen twice a week.

"It's my fault," I stammered. "I didn't know his father would get his water cut off. But I'll stop by and water him from now on."

Elleen thanked me. "Anything new with Seanna?" she asked.

"She blew a kiss at me today. But her mom's still mad at me for holding her gloved hand."

Elleen laughed. "That'll make Seanna want you even more. Nothing turns a girl on like a bad boy."

I started to question if Elleen was the best one to give advice about a 'bad boy' since Brad had turned her thorn, but I liked Elleen too much to say that. Of course, since our emotions and thoughts were coursing as one through my veins, she knew what I was thinking almost before I did. She laughed, then cocked her head sideways in my mind. "For what it's worth, Mr Miles Stanton, you're too nice a guy to ever be bad. But it'll still help if Seanna sees you as forbidden fruit. Not that what you feel for her is anything more than base horniness and minor infatuation."

I sighed. It was pointless to argue with her over what I felt, or didn't feel, toward Seanna, because Elleen would simply say she saw my motives with more clarity than I could ever muster. Still, it irritated for Elleen to dismiss so easily my love for Seanna.

Elleen and I then talked about her story and Brad's reaction to it. Back in school, Elleen had been the best writer around, with some of her romances picked up by the larger net zines. She still created stories, but now Brad and I were her entire audience. I'd once tried to write the stories down, but the pictures she crafted in my head refused to match any words I knew.

I asked Elleen if she had any new stories; in response, she sang a beautiful tale of a princess lost in a big city. But halfway

through the story, just as the princess was about to find the magic key to take her home, Elleen stopped. "Someone's near us," she whispered in panic.

I tried to wake up, but Elleen's thorn trance was so strong I couldn't wake. Suddenly, Elleen's trunk vibrated and the thorn in my palm shattered. I fell back into the dirt with a start. When I looked up, the sky above was dark except for a few moon-lit clouds scudding by. I jumped up, afraid.

The only people out at night were thorn die.

Elleen's limbs and trunk glowed with the slightest of bioluminescence. I cursed softly, grabbing my shotgun off the ground as I wished I'd brought my full-spectrum flashlight. It wouldn't stop determined thorn die, but it might scare them. Being killed rarely scared thorn die; pain usually did.

I edged away from Elleen until I reached the dirt road. The road ran between my father's fields and the scrub forest that'd grown up on the abandoned suburban lands. Perfect place for an ambush. Still, I had no choice. I ran down the road as fast and quiet as I could.

I saw the porch lights of home, saw my father standing outside looking for me, and I started to relax. Suddenly three people stepped from the dark shadow beneath a tree. I turned to run, but more people surrounded me.

I aimed the shotgun at a woman standing in front of me. She was half-naked, her breasts showing the faint glowing streaks of infection snaking through her body. "Hold me," she moaned seductively before laughing. One of the men next to her giggled and hugged the woman; he was naked, as were most of the others around me. The phage drove thorn die almost insane with a desire to touch other people. But what made the man stand out were the tattoos of numbers across his chest and arms. Prime numbers and base pairs; quadratic equations and Einstein's famous $E=mc^2$. The tattoos' dyes had attracted the phage infection so the numbers glowed faintly as he moved.

I had never seen this many thorn die at once and I aimed the shotgun from one to the next. If I shot one, the others would be on me before I could pump another shell in the chamber. One of the thorn die reached for me, but the tattooed numbered man pulled him back.

"My apology," the number man said. "The phage screams at us during end stage, especially around uninfected like you."

I nodded in false sympathy. "I understand. Now if you'll just get out of my way..."

The group tightened around me. "First, I'm curious about the thorn tree you were talking to a few moments ago," the man said.

"She's a friend. I take care of her."

That obviously wasn't what the numbered man wanted to know. But before he could be more specific, the half-naked woman beside him jumped at me. I fired the shotgun at her chest, seeing an afterimage of blood and glowing tissue imploding as the numbered man screamed and tried in vain to stop the other thorn die from attacking me. I knocked one thorn die away with the gun's butt, dodged another and started to run when someone grabbed my right leg. I stumbled to the ground, trying to pump the next round in the chamber, but the others were almost on me.

Suddenly a shotgun blast rent the air, then another, then a

third. I rolled over to find my father shooting the thorn die. I grabbed my own shotgun and crawled over to him. By the time I'd pumped in a new shell, the remaining thorn die were gone, my last glimpse being of the number man as he bolted through the darkness. The shot ones screamed on the ground as their torn bodies raced to take root before death.

"Come on," Dad yelled as he grabbed my arm and dragged me to the house. "There's too many of them."

We ran fast as we could, still hearing the yelling and screaming even after we bolted the front door. Once my father made sure the thorn die weren't attacking the house, he grabbed my face in his ungloved hands and asked if I was okay. "Did they touch you? Did their blood splatter on you?"

I shook my head, shocked at my father touching me for only the second time in my life. He asked again if they'd touched me, but all I could think about was how warm his flesh felt on mine. I tried to remember if any of the thorn die had touched me. The one who'd grabbed me had only gotten a hold of my pants and boots. And I didn't see any of their blood on me. But maybe someone had touched me. I couldn't be sure.

Dad hugged me tight and mumbled a prayer as he picked up his shotgun. "I'll stand first watch," he said.

Outside, the screaming continued as the wounded thorn die rooted their damned bodies to the ground.

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The sun rose silent, the wounded thorn die having truly died, the phage rebuilding their bodies into silicon and cellulous. Now that the sun was up, the thorn seedlings would grow quickly, reach their full height within days as their bodies and sunlight were absorbed by a matrix a hundred times as efficient as a leafy plant's chlorophyll. As I walked around our house, I wondered where the other thorn die had holed up. Once you were infected with an active phage, exposure to the sun sped up the painful change, which was why thorn die avoided sunlight and houses equipped with full-spectrum spotlights.

Dad was hung-over from drinking too much last night. He also felt guilty about being too drunk to realize I hadn't come back by dark, and worried that I'd gotten an active phage from either the thorn die or his own touch. He opened our safe and took out all the money we had saved.

We drove downtown to the pharmacy, where Dad explained what had happened. The Doc seemed sympathetic. "You need to tell the sheriff about this," she said as she took the money from Dad's gloved hand and counted it. I knew we didn't have enough for a single test, let alone two. But to my surprise the Doc handed back some of the money and told me to step over for my blood sample. Dad wasn't getting a test, even though he'd touched me. I protested, but the Doc whispered to shut up and act like a man. "Odds are, you'll have the same results," she said.

The test took four hours to run, so Dad and I walked down to the sheriff's office. Sheriff Alice Koffee said she'd heard reports of several large thorn die groups moving through the area. "There have been a few reports like this over the last few months," she said. "Groups of thorn die move through an area and attack any memorial groves they find. Evidently they've been undergoing some type of revival-like movement which preaches that memorial groves are sinful, but it's difficult to get specifics on

what they're up to."

The sheriff suggested we move closer to town until this passed, but Dad said we'd be fine. We then drove uptown and landscaped the memorial grove until noon, then drove back to the pharmacy. I tried to stay calm while we waited for the Doc, but my gut clenched and I could barely breathe. When she told me I was fine, my body shook so hard Dad had to help me stand out of my chair.

Figuring that I needed some time alone, Dad said he'd finish landscaping the grove. I drove over to Seanna's house, needing to talk to someone, but her mother eyed me suspiciously and said she'd gone shopping. I then drove home. I could see the thorn die bodies near the fields. They looked like shrunken mummies, each desiccated body centered on a half-meter nub of silver reaching for the sun.

Still needing to talk, I walked over to Elleen, but words were worthless for what I found. Elleen's trunk was severed, almost all of her limbs and thorns destroyed. A single limb remained, attached to a bare sliver of trunk half-dug out of the ground.

Crouching beside her, I gingerly pressed a finger to one of her remaining thorns. She appeared in my mind – hazy, delirious, but alive. At first she couldn't remember who I was, but then she accessed her memories in her remaining branch and smiled at me. She said the thorn die attacked her last night; that they broke her apart piece by piece as they giggled and impaled themselves on her needles.

I ran home and returned with my work tools. I carefully dug up Elleen's roots, the shovel cracking through her sun bleached bones. I then wrapped her roots in a wet burlap sack and carried her to our greenhouse.

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I fussed over Elleen for the rest of the day, and Dad joined me when he arrived home. We placed her under the grow lights in the greenhouse behind our house, soaked her in nutrient rich soil, did everything to keep her from dying. Dad figured it was touch and go, but said she might pull through.

"It's weird, the thorn die doing this," he said later as we sat on the porch watching the sun set. I held my shotgun, while an automatic rifle I'd never seen before rested on Dad's lap. "And I don't understand why they're attacking the memorial groves. I mean, they'll all be trees in a few weeks or months. Why attack their own?"

Dad said that as he'd left town, the sheriff and fire departments were preparing for the worst and had called up their auxiliary officers. The National Guard was also out.

But Dad and I didn't get hit that night. On the horizon, we saw fires in the direction of town and heard a number of gunshots. If the phones and general nets had still been up, we'd have known what was happening. But they'd been gone for the last decade in this part of the state and the security nets were so overloaded we couldn't log on, so we sat on the porch all night long, slapping mosquitoes and waiting for first light.

The next morning the smell of smoke strangled the air as Dad and I drove to town. We first rode through the outlying subdivisions so I could check on Seanna. We found her and Brad's houses burned to the ground. There was no sign of Seanna and her family, but one of their neighbors said Seanna and her mother had been hurt and were in the hospital downtown.

When I walked next door to Brad's house, I found his father's charred body in what had been the living room. Brad's old German Sheppard, Sarge, lay dead near the body, as if he'd been trying to protect his master.

Out back, Brad's tree looked like it had survived. But when I touched a thorn to give Brad the bad news, the crystalline structure shattered to shards. Dad shook his head and said the fire's heat must have killed Brad too.

While I cried, Dad patted me on the shoulder with his gloved hand. I understood that even with Brad's death it wasn't worth us risking another touch.

We buried Brad's father and Sarge beside Brad and I said a few words, telling Brad how much I'd miss him, how much Elleen loved him. We then drove to town. Burned barricades blocked most of the roads, with dozens of thorn die bodies laying around, some trying to root into the asphalt of Main Street. The National Guard still manned the barricades and Dad didn't think we'd be let in, but to our surprise a weary sergeant told us to go straight to the sheriff's office.

Turned out the thorn die attack on the barricades and houses, no matter how bloody, had only been a diversion. A larger group attacked the town's memorial groves, smashing machetes and axes through the silver trees. Two groves in the poorer, outlying parts of town were totally destroyed, every tree missing branches and thorns, while the rich memorial grove Dad and I worked on had been partially damaged. We found the Sheriff near several of the grove's oldest thorn trees, all of whom were Blondheim relatives. The old trees had half their branches hacked off.

"Hundreds of them attacked the grove," Sheriff Koffee said, "led by some thorn die named Chance with glowing number tattoos on his skin. Security nets say he used to be a math professor before the last universities shut down. Anyway, we beat them off before they torched the whole grove, but instead of being content at that Mrs Blondheim's been screaming at me all morning for not doing more."

At the mention of the thorn die with the tattoos, I told Sheriff Koffee that he'd also attacked me, but she was distracted by the return of Mrs Blondheim, who yelled at my Dad to save her trees. We inspected them. Several were obviously goners, while a handful might be saved with quick action. I started to tell Mrs Blondheim that no matter what we did the trees had already lost any memories stored in their severed branches, but a stern look from Dad made me hush. I looked around the now unrecognizable grove, located Mom's tree, and went to talk with her while Dad and the Sheriff hashed things out with Mrs Blondheim.

Mom was happy to see me, but then she was always happy now that she was a thorn. I told her about Elleen and the grove being attacked, and how Brad and his father were dead, at which point I broke down and cried. Mom held me tight and told me to hush, that everything would be all right. She talked just like when I was a child suffering from a terrible nightmare. Once I finished crying, she asked how Brad and Elleen were. I stared at her deep-beautiful blue eyes and saw myself reflected back as the child she'd known before she turned. To Mom, I'd never grow up because she couldn't change, the memories and soul burned hard and static and unbending into the tree's crystal structure. No matter what I did in life, Mom would forever be the same person as when she died.

Even though I hated to lie, I told her Brad and Elleen were okay. "That's good," she said. "Everyone needs best friends."

Dad and I spent the rest of the day shoring up injured trees in the grove. By lunch time, a large crowd of townsfolk had gathered, with people checking on the trees of relatives and friends or trying to help me and Dad. A National Guard Captain stopped by at one point and almost started a riot when he suggested people pull back to the center of town tonight – where it'd be easier to protect against the next attack – instead of defending the memorial grove. Several townsfolk actually pulled guns on the Captain until Sheriff Koffee calmed things down by saying we'd defend everyone in town, including the thorn trees.

When dusk was a few hours away, Dad loaded our tools in the truck and said we needed to get going. Sheriff Koffee urged us to stay in town, offering to let us room in her house. Dad thanked her but said we'd be fine at home.

As we drove away we passed neighbors and friends preparing to defend the town and the memorial grove. I felt so ashamed at leaving that I sunk down in the seat to hide. I asked Dad why we couldn't stay in town. I wanted to defend Seanna, who was still unconscious in the hospital. I wanted to defend Mom's tree. I wanted to stand with my neighbors. But Dad said sometimes it's best not to do what everyone else does and left it at that.

Over the next few days the thorn die attacked the town two more times. Dad and I took turns guarding our house at night. In the morning we drove to town and worked at saving the trees. Sheriff Koffee said the security nets reported attacks on memorial groves in several nearby towns and cities. Once the thorn die destroyed all the groves in a town, they tended to leave the remaining townsfolk alone.

On the third day I finally was allowed to see Seanna, who was recovering from a nasty hit she'd taken to the head. For once her mother didn't shoo me away. I blew a kiss at Seanna and told her to get well. Seanna smiled from her hospital bed and reached her bare hand out for me, missing my arm by a hair. Her mother giggled nervously and told me Seanna was still delirious. "She'll be alright," she muttered over and over. "She'll be alright."

When Dad and I returned home, I ran to the greenhouse to check on Elleen. She looked much better, with a number of needles budding from her trunk and remaining limb. I carefully pricked my palm.

"She's infected," Elleen said with a frown.

"What?"

"Seanna. She's infected. That's why she tried to grab you."

I nodded. Obviously, Elleen knew more than I did about how infected people acted. I tried to feel sorry for both Seanna and myself at the news, but after all the death and pain of the last few days I couldn't move past a weary numbness. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Better. It's funny how all that hacking and cutting didn't hurt. Just left me confused for a bit."

I smiled. I'd been helping Elleen remember certain things like Brad, giving her some of my own memories to replace what she was missing. Each new memory expanded the buds on her body. Elleen and I also talked about Brad's burial. She was trying to create words to put on his tombstone. I told her I'd carve the

stone once all the craziness calmed down.

Before I left, Elleen mentioned that she'd spoken with Chance, the numbered thorn die who'd hacked her to pieces. "He was extremely sad at hurting me, but said one day I'd understand. He also asked for your forgiveness. I was a little confused by then, but I'm pretty sure he asked for your forgiveness, not mine, even though I was the one being torn apart."

I asked Elleen why Chance hadn't finished the job and killed her. Elleen didn't know. She then told me to be careful. "They're determined," she said. "Nothing scarier in the world than a determined person."

That night Dad and I sat on the porch. There was only silence from town, the National Guard's full spectrum spotlights casting a hazy glow above the pines and oaks on the horizon. Dad sat quietly counting his ammunition when we heard a giggle from the darkness before us.

"You don't want to do this," Dad yelled. "We ain't in your way."

"I agree," a voice called back, "and I don't want to do this. But I do want to talk. Will you kill your spotlights?"

I started to say hell no, but Dad waved for me to go do it. I walked in the house and threw the switch for the front spotlights. However, I left the lights shining in the greenhouse out back. I didn't want these bastard to get near Elleen. I expected Dad to be mad at me for that, but he merely nodded in agreement when I returned to the porch.

As our eyes grew used to the dark, we saw dozens of faintly glowing thorn die standing in the treeline. One thorn die walked forward. He stopped a few meters from the porch, glowing numbers covering his skin.

"You're Chance, I assume," Dad said. "You should know I'm pretty mad at what you did to Elleen, and almost did to my son."

Chance shrugged. "I tried to stop them from attacking your son, but they wouldn't listen. Anyway, I don't want to talk about all that. I'm wondering why you two aren't in town."

"Not our fight," Dad said.

"But I've seen you working in the memorial grove."

Dad thought for a moment. "I'm a gardener. I always have been. Helping the trees helps people feel better about those they've lost. But that doesn't mean I'm going to die defending the damn things."

Chance smiled and clapped his hands. "Exactly. That's what people miss. Those trees are just an unchanging echo of the person they used to be. Many of us thorn die believe the worst hell we'll ever experience is being trapped for hundreds of years as we are at the moment we die. Kept like an old photo or video. Only taken out when someone wants to revisit old memories."

Dad didn't say anything, but I could see he agreed with Chance's words.

"What about your wife's tree?" Chance asked.

Dad bristled at the mention of Mom and shifted the rifle in his hand. "My wife is dead, Mr Chance. And I don't appreciate you dredging up our private affairs."

Chance giggled nervously. "Quite right," he said. "That's exactly right. We won't be bothering you or your son, assuming you stay out of the fight."

"We'll still be working in the grove each day," Dad said.

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

Chance thanked Dad and I, then turned and walked back to the treeline. He was already there when I jumped off the porch and ran after him. "Wait," I yelled. "Why didn't you kill Elleen?"

Chance turned. In the dark, I couldn't see his face, only the glowing numbers across his arms and chest. "Because we weren't trying to kill her," he said. "We were helping her. None of us are the person we were yesterday – we're only truly alive as long as we keep growing. And sometimes to grow you must lose something. You, of all people, should understand that."

I protested, wanting more explanation, but several of the thorn die in the darkness around me giggled in warning. I ran back to the porch as Chance laughed.

In the morning I talked with Elleen, telling her everything that Chance said. Elleen seemed to have improved even more overnight, with dozens of needle buds sprouting and several of her larger needles thickening into small branches. I'd never seen a thorn tree bounce back so quickly from near death and Elleen blushed at my compliment.

"Chance might be right," Elleen said. "I feel so alive right now. Like anything is possible."

However, whatever Dad and I were doing right for Elleen wasn't working for the trees in the memorial grove. Even though the thorn die hadn't attacked overnight, several more trees had succumbed to shock from previous injuries. Dad and I worked the best we could, splicing busted limbs and applying nutrients to gashes and cuts, but he told me few of the injured trees would survive. It was almost as if they lacked the will to live. I felt sorry for the dying trees and, when I realized one was the young girl who'd said hello to me the other day, I touched her needles. But her thoughts were so confused and diffuse that there was little consciousness left to comfort.

I spent lunchtime with Mom, telling her about how good Elleen was doing, about what Chance had told us. Of course, Mom forgot my words shortly after I spoke them. I wondered if I should do like Chance and cut off some of Mom's branches and thorns. Force her to grow new memories and life. But I was too weak; I couldn't do that to Mom. As she hugged me farewell and said to watch after Dad, someone yanked me off her thorn. I fell back into the sun and stared up at the angry face of Mrs Blondheim.

"Get back to work," she yelled. "How dare you waste time when my trees are dying."

I tried to tell her that the injured trees were going to die no matter what we did because they'd stopped living years ago, but my backtalk only made Mrs Blondheim angrier. She began hitting me with her cane, telling me to go to work, when Dad and the Sheriff walked up. Dad calmly grabbed Mrs Blondheim's cane in mid-air as it was about to strike me again.

"How dare you," Mrs Blondheim spat at Dad.

Dad yanked the cane away from her and handed it to the Sheriff. "We're done here," he said. "Sheriff, if you need us we'll be at our house."

Mrs Blondheim stared in horror at Dad. "You will get back to work, or I'll have your wife's tree dug up. I'll hack it down like those scum did to the other trees."

Dad glanced at Mom's tree, then nodded sadly. "My wife died a long time ago," he said. "There's nothing you can do to hurt her."

He then led me away. Mrs Blondheim screamed at Sheriff Koffee to arrest us, but the Sheriff ignored her. Other people who'd heard Mrs Blondheim's outburst walked away shaking their heads.

Two days later, the thorn die attacked the grove a final time. A few townsfolk still fought back, but the Sheriff and the National Guard kept their people away from the grove, instead making their stand between the thorn die and the living part of town. As the Sheriff told us later, there comes a point when you have to decide what's worth dying for – and for Alice Koffee, the dead weren't worth any more dying.

The next morning Dad and I walked through the splinters of the memorial grove. We found Mom's tree missing most of her branches. I tried talking to Mom, to see if she was still inside, fighting for life like Elleen had done, but all I felt was silence. We dug up her bones from beneath the roots and buried her alongside Brad and his father. Dad said Brad's old backyard would make for a good burial ground. I agreed and drove back to our farm, where I found Elleen's bones. I carried them back and buried her next to Brad.

I then drove to the hospital. Seanna was in a darkened isolation room. Her mom was talking to Mrs Blondheim about planting Seanna in the rebuilt memorial grove. I tried to convince Seanna's mom not to do that, to instead let Seanna out of isolation to enjoy her remaining months of life. "And when she's dead, don't let her stay the same. Cut off her branches. Force her to grow and change. She'll thank you for it one day."

But Seanna's mom and Mrs Blondheim merely looked in horror at my suggestion, as if I'd told them to murder Seanna in her sleep. I started to argue, but realized there are people you don't waste time arguing with. So I told Seanna through the isolation door that I loved her, then walked away.

I finished carving the tombstones the following spring, taking extra care with the letters of Elleen's tribute to each person. Because she refused to create words for her own bones, I simply wrote the words A FRIEND on her burial marker. I could tell she was pleased with that.

Even though the thorn die continued to attack memorial groves across the region, none ever again bothered Elleen. When she was big enough, I planted her beside our porch so I could talk with her every day. Elleen once again glowed a faint blue. And even though I hated the idea of doing so, I promised Elleen that if she ever became stuck in who and what she was, I'd cut off some of her branches and thorns. "Just so you can grow again," I told her with a smile.

But I didn't have to worry about that for now. As I sat with my palm on Elleen's needles, we shivered to the faint chill wind and listened to the crickets humming and watched the stars washing the sky. Feeling bold, I asked Elleen what made her want to live on and on. She laughed and hugged me and kissed me on the lips of my mind until I forgot all about my question and simply kissed her back.

Jason Sanford's previous story for *Interzone* was 'The Ships Like Clouds, Risen By Their Rain' published in issue 217. He's also appeared in *Analog*, *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show*, and other places. His website is jasonsanford.com.

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CHE

alexander marsh freed

On the longest night of Markos's life, he stares at Isabel's blond bangs so that he doesn't have to meet her eyes and says, "Sometimes I wonder if I'm imagining it. Sometimes I wonder if I'm obsessive-compulsive and just don't know any better."

Isabel throws a cigarette butt into the gravel lining the rooftop and half-rolls onto her side on the lawn chair. "Does it matter if the magic's real?" she asks. "As long as it works?"

"That's the thing, though," Markos says. "I don't know if it works anymore. I just know it's getting harder."

.....

The bus (the 358 to Aurora, five minutes behind schedule) pulls up to the curb a block from the supermarket, glowing like a ghost with headlights. Markos clutches a bag of groceries in both arms as the door hisses open and three passengers disembark. His knees lock as he prepares to climb the steps, and then he feels the barrier in front of him: a web of astral cords, embedded in a crack in the world; fraying and broken silver threads spun from auras on an invisible wheel; the ties between riders and their destinations. Markos can't enter the bus until the web is gone. He dreads the thought of entangling himself in someone's abandoned destiny.

The driver watches him with dead eyes. Markos flexes his fingers, but he can't form the banishing sigils while carrying his groceries. If he puts the bag down, he'll look like a fool.

Markos shakes his head. The driver – Markos recognizes him, and knows to his shame that they've been through this before – moves his lips and lets the door accordion shut. Markos walks home. He passes three more bus stops, but every bus he sees is cursed the same way.

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"What are you playing around with that shit for anyway?" Pedro asks. He sits with Markos in Washington Square on a bench smelling of wet autumn leaves. Isabel left half an hour ago. She said she had other commitments.

Markos flips over a polished chunk of jade in his palm, as if

SHENU

he's trying to figure out which side is up. "Barry got it right," he says, and looks at the man beside him. "I don't see why I can't."

Pedro is more than twice Markos's age. Maybe more than three times Isabel's. His gray moustache was never in style at any point in his lifetime. Pedro holds court daily in Washington Square. "I didn't say you *can't*. But you're a damn fool for trying. What do you want to put your soul in a rock for?"

"Rocks are tough," Markos says. "And it's not my soul. It's my ren. It's an Egyptian *Book of Breathings* technique. Barry –"

"Barry used his cell phone as a shenu, and his heart stopped when the battery exploded. Car accident my ass."

Markos closes his hand entirely around the jade, and draws a ward on his forehead from the drop of rain that strikes above his nose. "Barry was a great magician," he says. "He just wasn't an idea man."

"More than you are," Pedro says, and laughs until he coughs an unpleasant, watery cough.

Isabel has a new tattoo. It's late at night, but she's invited Markos and Pedro to come see it. Only Markos comes to her apartment, because Pedro loses his magic if he steps off city property. Even the past few days of rain don't keep Markos away.

Isabel's magic comes from what she calls neo-Taoist Iconism. Each of her tattoos summons the ghost of a person who represents something she wants – some skill the person's good at. Isabel has a shelf full of pop science books which she uses to explain how she can summon the ghosts of the living. Isabel believes that time is nonlinear.

"Do you want a beer?" Isabel asks.

Markos wants to agree, but he's worried he'll have to cast a spell of unsealing before twisting the cap. If he doesn't, where will the seal's energy go? He'd need to see the bottle first, to be sure.

"Okay," he says.

Isabel brings out one beer bottle and two plastic cups. She

twists off the bottlecap, and Markos thinks her eyelids twitch when she sees him flinch. She fills the cups.

The tattoo is of a stylized dog stuck in a web. It's on Isabel's right leg, just above her knee. She worries it with a fingertip, keeping her foot flat on a chair next to the flimsy kitchen card table. Her green pleated skirt is pulled just high enough. "He's an animal rescue worker. I'm going to use him next time the damn dog across the street starts growling at me."

"Nice to know that's the worst you have going on," Markos says.

"Fuck you," Isabel says, laughing. "What are you doing with your magic that's so great?"

Markos takes a swallow of his beer and looks up from the hem of Isabel's skirt. "I don't even know," he says. "I'm casting all the time now. I can't walk down the street without raising a ward."

"Why?"

Markos shrugs. He licks his sticky lips, stalling before he admits, "Because I can feel what's out there. Something's reaching for me."

"Like what?"

Markos is slightly embarrassed by the questions. "I don't know," he says. "It's not after *me*, specifically. But Barry taught me to see connections between things. Magician's sight. So this thing is crossing the cracks in reality, walking bad connections like a tightrope. It's all the magic someone didn't use. Like I'm summoning all the mistakes no one made."

"Maybe you are," Isabel says. "Rules of sympathy, and all that shit. There are ugly things in the world; if you're thinking about them, you need to be careful."

"Maybe," Markos says, and reaches for his beer again.

38th Street was Pedro's suggestion. Markos, Isabel, and Pedro walk side by side down the road. It's only lightly trafficked on Tuesday afternoon. A hunk of jade inscribed with Markos's ren and bound with a cord wears at Markos's thigh inside his

pocket.

The three look at the telephone poles lining the sidewalk. Each pole is covered in leathery gray layers of flyers and bills worn down and torn by weather and human hands. Only the surface layers of paper are legible; the parchment skin beneath is rough and textured, and the words are puffy with moisture.

"What are you offering?" Isabel asks.

Markos swings a beige plastic drug store bag in one hand. "First edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*."

Pedro looks unimpressed. Isabel raises her eyebrows. "Isn't that a lot?"

Markos shakes his head. "Not when it's in this condition."

"So, which one do you like?" Pedro asks, flipping two fingers at the street.

Markos stands still, trying to feel the threads between the poles and himself, between the poles and each other, and between the poles and the city. A dozen impressions sink below his skin and drain his breath. By the time he picks an old pole beside a blue pickup truck, Isabel is boredly studying a boutique window.

Out of the bag comes a battered hardcover and a stapler. Markos tears three pages from the book and attaches them to the pole, whispering an incantation. When he's finished, he closes his eyes and runs his hand downward. The texture of the paper skin is almost like tree bark.

He finds a gap and dips his fingers into the slit, running his hand upward again and into the pole itself. His palm is pressed tight against the surface, but he keeps moving it to and fro, as if indecisive. He stops breathing altogether for a moment when he finds the object of his search, and rips something free of the flesh.

Markos opens his palm, and a crumpled piece of paper unfolds like a blooming flower.

"What did you get?" Pedro asks.

"Advert," Markos says. "I think for a concert. But there's an address."

Isabel leaves her window and rejoins the group. "We moving on?" she asks.

Markos dreams about a beach. It's twilight. Maybe it's dawn, but the important thing is that the sun is orange and the sky is purple, and the water is slowly filling the maze of arm's-width canals dug into the sand. The men and women who walk along the beach are oblivious to the maze, easily stepping over the canals, but every now and then a watery limb reaches up and drags a person to sea.

Markos stands perfectly still at the center of a long, spiraling canal. It will take days for the water to reach him.

He wakes up to the sound of his alarm clock, but he doesn't lift an arm to turn it off. He can hear the watery limbs murmuring beneath the beeps of the alarm, and he doesn't want to draw their attention. He moves his lips slowly, speaking the correct words to shield himself. By the time he finishes, he's late for work, and the steady beeping of the alarm echoes in his head for the rest of the day.

"The only person I've ever met who made a shenu work was Ryan Morris," Pedro says. The rain is coming down steadily,

and they've moved to the relative cover of Washington Square's gazebo. "You know him?"

Markos doesn't. Pedro continues. "Had a wife. Gorgeous woman. Used *her* as a shenu – put part of his magic in her. He couldn't control it anymore, but you know why it worked so well?"

Markos doesn't give Pedro a lot of credibility when it comes to magic. Barry did. Barry introduced Pedro to Markos as High Eidolon of the City. Markos thinks that's an awfully impressive title for a retired municipal worker who knows trash collection routes and telephone area code boundaries really well. Markos admires Barry and Pedro, but they both have – had – problems.

"It worked because his magic grew and changed with his wife," Pedro continues. "She got older and wiser, so he got older and wiser – and by putting his magic in someone else, he had access to power he couldn't have got otherwise. Power only she could get. But she shared it."

Markos looks at Pedro in time to see the man nod at his own sage advice. Rain filters the world behind him with gray.

"It wouldn't work between us," Markos says.

"Who?" Pedro asks. His smile shows yellow teeth.

"You know who," Markos says. But he says her name anyway.

"Pedro and I were talking about what you said the other night," Isabel says. She's feeding crumbs of a bagel to a swarm of adoring pigeons, while Pedro eats from a bag of honey-roasted peanuts he bought from a street vendor. Markos's heart races, and he can feel heat in his cheeks.

"What did I say?" Markos asks, failing to sound amused and casual.

"You said you felt like something's after you? So I did some reading." The heat fades from Markos's face, and he smiles gratefully. Isabel keeps going. "It's like dark energy, or dark matter. The universe is saturated by this stuff, but most people never know it, because it's the power behind the choices they *didn't* make. You're seeing it now. Dark quintessence. So it's seeing you."

"Tell him about the noose," Pedro says, spitting peanut detritus onto the sidewalk.

"This can't be good," Markos says. He takes a step forward, starts to kneel so that he's eye level with Pedro and Isabel, then thinks better of getting so close to the pigeons. An urge seizes him, and he draws a sigil over one lump of bread before it can be gobbled up. He's not sure why; it just seems right.

"Okay," Isabel says. "So you've got the attention of this thing that's stuck in the cracks of the universe. It's closing in on you. But you can't face it, because it's everywhere. Right?"

Markos nods his agreement.

"Well, think of it like a noose. It's all around you, but if you close it up completely, it's just a knot. A knot you can cut, or untie." Isabel glances between the pigeons and Markos, as if one or the other is a distraction.

"So we're going to help you tug it closed," Pedro says.

Markos almost laughs. "How?"

"You're going to feel out those threads of connection, and start following them instead of banishing them. And we'll be at your back," Isabel says. She makes eye contact this time. Then she makes eye contact with the pigeons.

"I don't even know where to start," Markos says.

"I do," Pedro says cheerily.

During the twenty-four hours preceding the creation of his shenu, Markos is more careful than usual not to forget a ward. He can't allow anything to pollute his aura before he locks his magic away. He waited until Sunday to perform the ritual for this very reason; he doesn't have to work Saturdays, so he had fewer chances to screw up.

In the past, when he's failed to reinforce or break a connection, he hasn't suffered much from it. But it's best not to take risks. The dread he feels – when he can't cast in time with a rising elevator, or when he leaves a movie before the credits end and he can't properly close the spell – isn't something he likes to question. All things are connected. The nature of all things is to be in sympathy. It's a magician's responsibility to maintain those connections. To keep the world from falling into the cracks.

In his apartment, Markos binds his ren to the shenu. The ritual isn't especially difficult. Carving his sigil into the jade is the hardest part, and he's practiced writing with a knife before. Then he ties the cord around the rock, walks in circles a few times, says the right things and makes the right gestures.

After it's all over, he clutches the embodiment of his magic in one hand and opens the refrigerator with the other, looking for his pitcher of filtered water. He wonders if Barry would have been proud.

Markos and Isabel unfold lawn chairs on the roof of her apartment building. It's almost midnight, but Markos won't find a safe bus at this hour and Isabel never seems to sleep. They've both had a few beers, which makes unfolding the chairs slightly awkward.

After they sit, they're quiet for a long while. Markos keeps his head raised to avoid noticing the patterns in the gravel. The patterns fade if he looks at them directly, but they're just as real as the images in clouds or the faces in television static. He draws a series of sigils on the chair legs to insulate himself.

Markos takes a breath and lets it out with a sound resembling the word "I." Isabel doesn't notice. He does it again. Then he turns his head, stares at Isabel's blond bangs so that he doesn't have to meet her eyes, and says, "Sometimes I wonder if I'm imagining it."

"I don't think she's coming out," Pedro says.

Markos and Pedro watch the door of the club. The club has changed names at least once since the concert advert was posted, though that's the least of Markos's concerns. Isabel is still inside. Markos hopes she's still inside.

"I should go back," Markos says.

A laughing couple strolls in through the club door, distracting from the solemnity of Markos's words.

"The hell you should," Pedro says. "Come on. No point wasting time here."

"We need her," Markos insists, and glowers at Pedro.

Pedro is unfazed. "That's why you want to go after her?"

Markos wants to kick an aluminum soda can the wind blows his way. Instead, he picks it up, draws a sigil on its bottom, and throws it overhand into a nearby waste bin. "You were always the one saying I *should* go after her."

"Not if you're going to screw with her magic. This is her thing. If you can't accept that, you shouldn't go after her at all."

Markos closes his eyes. He waits a while. "You still want to do this, then?" he asks.

Pedro shrugs. "Don't have anything better to do tonight."

Isabel's spine pops as she arches sideways and digs both thumbs into her right hipbone. She wrinkles her small nose and her eyes water, and then she sways straight again. The club isn't so crowded that this goes unnoticed. Markos adores seeing Isabel activate her tattoos, but would never say so aloud.

"s working," Isabel says, a little slurred.

"Who is it?"

Isabel smiles shyly. "My aunt. She always gave me the best advice. So we'll see how it works now."

The club is small, cheap, and under renovation. The lights are bright halogen bulbs that substitute for absent track lighting in the rafters. Mixed in with the smell of sweat and deodorant is the smell of paint, though Markos isn't sure where the smell comes from. Markos doesn't recognize the music, and feels old.

"What's she say?" Markos asks.

Isabel slithers around a group of college students watching the dance floor and approaches the bar. Markos follows. "Always ask when you need directions," Isabel says. She gives a little wave to get the bartender's attention.

"My friend and I are looking for a monster," Isabel says, all smile and cocked head. "You know anyone we should talk to, or anywhere we should go, or anything?"

The bartender shrugs. "There's a little park up the street," he says, and gestures vaguely. "Maybe monsters come out at night there?"

Isabel thanks the man and returns to Markos with a triumphant look.

"I've never been so embarrassed in my life," Markos says under his breath, only half-joking.

Isabel's triumphant look becomes disbelieving. "Excuse me?" she says. "I was the one talking to him."

"You really believe what he said?"

Isabel scowls openly now. "Fuck you, Markos. When have I ever criticized the way you do your magic?"

Markos, too, is taken aback. "I wasn't criticizing your magic."

"Then what were you doing?" Isabel asks. She shakes her head. "Look, say goodbye to Pedro for me. I think I can get another tattoo here."

Markos says her name. She shrugs it off, walks through the club, and lays a hand on the shoulder of a curly-haired man about her own age. They're laughing and talking within moments. Markos watches.

Eventually, when he knows she's serious, Markos leaves the club.

The bartender is right about the park. A low brick wall is all that encloses the stretch of green. It's dark now, and Markos can't see far inside.

"You're on your own from here," Pedro says.

Markos turns to face Pedro. "What?"

Pedro's tone is plain and unperturbed. "This park's federal property. Don't belong to the city. I can't go in there."

"Can't you carry something to protect you? Steal a stop sign or something?"

Pedro shrugs. "Not today," he says. "Sorry." He starts back down the street, past the park.

"I thought you were watching my back!" Markos calls. He wants Pedro to know he's angry, but he's afraid he sounds pathetic. "I thought that was why you and Isabel came along!"

"It's getting late," Pedro says. "I'm old, Markos. I've been listening to you and Isabel talk about threads and cracks and shit all night, and you haven't said the same thing twice. At least get your story straight. You want to keep going now, you keep going, but I don't recommend it."

"It's doing this to us," Markos insists. "We're close, and everything's going wrong because it's breaking our connections. That's what it *does*. Don't let it do it..."

Pedro is already gone.

Markos stamps the sidewalk once. He sits on the cracked concrete, watches the tip of his shoelace swing, and draws wards around himself.

He insulates himself from foreign auras and spirits and tulpas, marking his body with a network of invisible lines. Face, out of the forehead and around the eyes. Down the shoulders like running ink. Breast, reflecting the Tree of Life. Back, working up to the neck from his waist. (Without looking, climbing the ladder of his spine takes forever.) Groin, drawing from his low energy point and then down the legs.

A second time, just to make sure.

He stands up when he's finished and dusts off his khakis. He re-draws the sigils over his pants. Then he lifts each foot, drawing sigils on his sneaker soles.

He wonders if he's better off waiting for another day. He wonders if he would do any of this in the morning.

Then he thinks about what he's just done, and about the agonizing prospect of casting his wards all over again. Slowly, he climbs the brick wall.

It's Friday morning, and Markos wakes up two hours before his bus leaves for work. He used to spend that time performing banishings and calling his goals for the coming day – reeling in spells and fates with silver thread like fishing wire. That magic doesn't work anymore. Not since the park.

He sits with a glass of orange juice and stares at the peeling paint beside his refrigerator for a long time.

There's no moon to light the park, and the trees blot out most of the cityscape. Distant streetlamps may as well be stars. There are wide, paved paths, but Markos has proceeded in a straight line and strayed from convenience. Each step he takes is a heavy arc, an attempt to ensure solid footing.

Markos doesn't know what he's looking for. He thinks he may be fleeing Pedro and Isabel.

He steps off soft dirt and onto a smooth surface that curves downward. The space around him feels open. He continues forward, cautious but fearless, descending into an unseen pit.

Something gurgles below him, and he freezes. The gurgling stops. Then it resumes, but this time it comes from all around. It begins to rain.

Hard, heavy drops splatter Markos. Within seconds, the rain

is a downpour, and Markos shivers from the cold. He tries to step backwards, but the slick, smooth slope tosses him gracelessly onto his rear. His palms press against wet concrete. At the touch, he feels the lines of his wards warp and distort.

He has fallen into a crack. He is hanging above the abyss.

Water stinking of mildew sloughs over his hands and laps at his thighs. It is made of auras shed like snakeskins and astral threads knotted from misuse. It is pure dark quintessence, omnipresent and entropic. It eats the sigils covering him as if it were acid.

Markos climbs to his feet and stumbles down the slope. Ahead of him is a foaming, frothing tower, both eye and mouth to the creature of his nightmares. He inhales, and his nostrils dampen with mold and mist. He coughs, and bitter water swirls around his tongue in a foul kiss. His knees bend.

Markos wonders if he's going to die friendless, magicless, drowned in a park. It really isn't how he wants to go.

"I don't know if it works anymore," Markos says. "I just know it's getting harder."

Isabel draws another cigarette from the packet at her side, lights it, and takes a drag. Markos starts to wonder if she's going to answer.

Then she does answer. "Markos?" she asks.

"Hm?"

Her lips curl into a smile. "Your magic works for me," she says.

Markos doesn't understand, but he likes to watch her smile. He waits.

"I never told anyone this," Isabel says. "But I got a tattoo at the base of my spine a year ago. It's for helping with magic. Whenever I need a spell to *really* work, whenever I'm really desperate or scared, I invoke it."

"I didn't know that," Markos says.

Isabel smirks. She goes on, as if Markos hadn't spoken. "Do you know who I invoke when I need to channel magic? You know where I go to find the most powerful magician in the world?"

Markos thinks about Barry.

"You," Isabel says. "I invoke you."

Markos isn't the most powerful magician in the world.

Isabel doesn't summon magicians, though. She summons ghosts. What *is* matters less than what *will be*.

Markos believes in Isabel.

Isabel believes that time is nonlinear.

Water beats on Markos's back like a hundred bamboo canes. He crouches on his knees, hip-deep in the growing pool. Despite the darkness, despite falling into the cracks, he makes a connection.

Markos reaches into his pocket. He panics for an instant, before one finger catches a damp cord. He draws forth his shenu and clutches it in his palm. In the dark, it seems to glow a warm, pale green.

A rock is tough, but water erodes a rock like a bad battery kills a cell phone. Pedro was right, Markos thinks. Who could've known? At the time, Markos hadn't had anywhere else to put his ren.

He raises the rock above his head, thinking the embodiment of his magic ought to weigh more. He drops the rock, catches the cord, and whirls it like a sling or a bullroarer. His head is

raised, and he squints at the tower-eye-mouth of the beast. It's larger. Maybe it's growing. Maybe it's coming closer.

Markos lets go. The rock flies free, and is devoured by the eye.

His ren falls into the abyss.

Markos allows himself to drown. His name unspools into silver thread; the thread unravels into an aura; the aura reverts to a spell; the spell reverts to quintessence. Still drowning, he loses his sense of direction along with the sight of his ren.

A million unintended, inchoate fates struggle to manifest from the dark quintessence surrounding him. A million unwanted spells. He can grasp any one, and it will transform into a shining rope leading to freedom. A million destinies, indistinguishable from the one he used to have.

He stays where he is. Touching everything. Dark quintessence. A new shenu.

Bowed again, Markos gasps for breath. The tower falls, and the rain stops. A tide tugs gently at his sleeves as the water flows to an unseen drain.

Minutes pass. Markos is lying on his back in an empty fountain in a park in the middle of the night.

He doesn't know what to do with his hands.

"You should apologize," Pedro says, before noisily slurping from a cardboard cup of tea. Markos sits beside Pedro on the bench. He can smell chamomile and sugar.

"I know," Markos says. "I will, I think. Eventually."

It's cold today. Washington Square is almost empty, except for joggers and their dogs. Markos sees the threads between them. The threads look like leashes. At the same time, the threads look like wires carrying a current of dark quintessence. From another angle, they'll look like something else. Markos has a broader perspective than he used to. He thinks he's adjusting all right.

"Why not now?" Pedro asks.

"Because –" Markos hesitates. "Because it's nice not to *have* to. It's nice to sit back, knowing that something's changed between us, and not feel obligated to drop everything to go fix it."

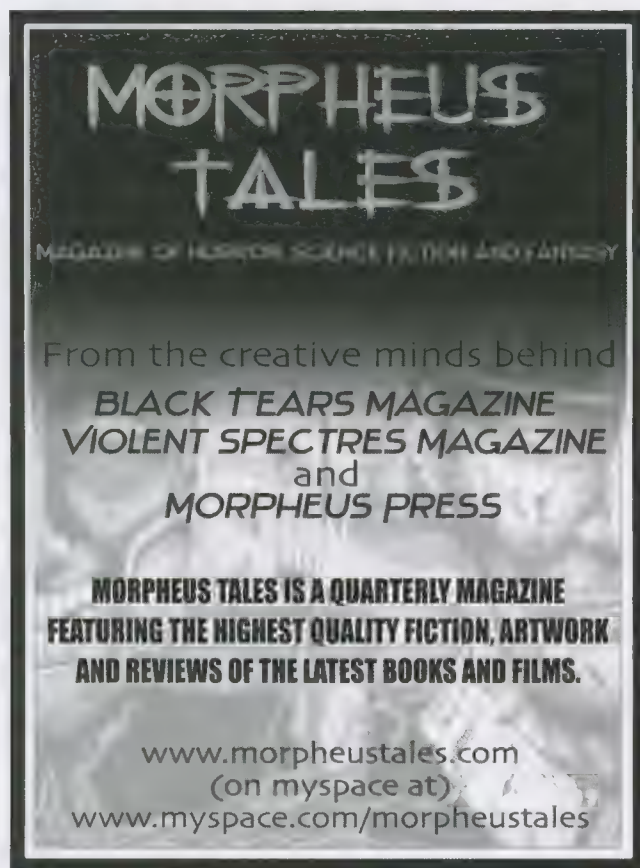
"You think she feels the same?"

Markos shrugs. "I think we've left marks on each other. Barry left his mark on me. Isn't that enough, sometimes?"

Pedro snorts, and returns his attention to his tea.

The bus (the 51 Downtown, two minutes ahead of schedule) pulls up to the curb. Markos climbs aboard and pays the fare. He finds a seat near the back, and sits in a cloud of outgrown auras and spooled threads. He catches himself drawing a ward and forces himself to stop. He doesn't need wards anymore. He can't create wards anymore. He couldn't seal away his shenu if he tried.

Markos stares across a crack at Isabel's blond bangs. The bus pulls away and tugs a noose into a knot. When the knot opens again, it will resemble an eye, and it will gaze at the world in a new light. ✧



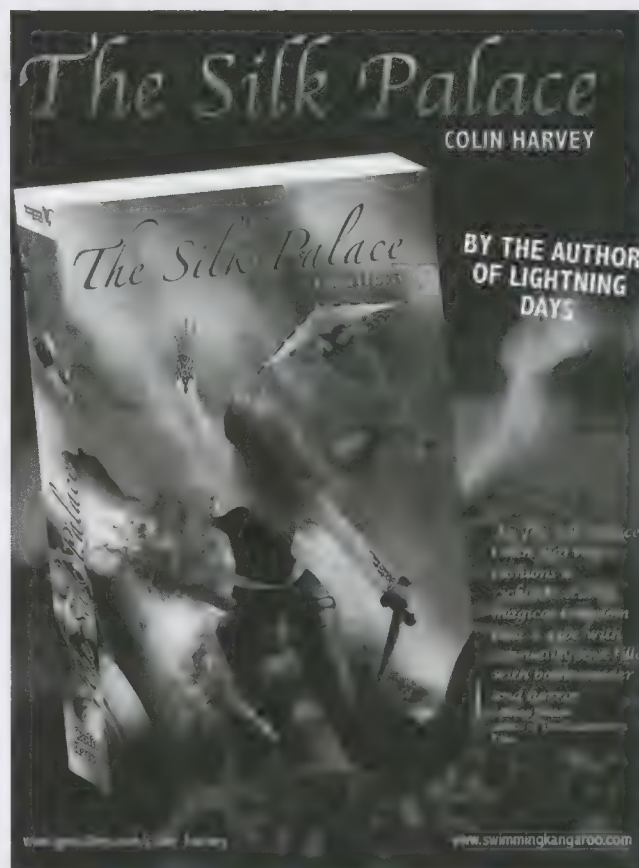
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THE

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FIFTH

MERCURIO D. RIVERA

Zhi 4's scream pierces the Siberian night.

My spiked metal boots crunch through the snow as I race towards him, with Zhi 6 running at my side. The nanochip in my brainstem clicks on, and I reach out with my mind, but I can't sense even a trace of Zhi 4. A few seconds earlier his form had been outlined by the dark turquoise glow of the force field.

We stop twenty feet short of the field's perimeter. Beyond it, the hazy silhouette of the colossal Stalk looms, its millions of cilia undulating.

My bodysuit hums as it transmits data back to Xiang Xu Base, situated behind the Rusanov ice cap half a mile away.

My pulse flutters in anticipation and I take a deep breath to try to rein in my excitement. I – like all Zhis – have been designed with an insatiable curiosity about the Stalk's origins and vulnerabilities. Knowing I've been bred to feel this way doesn't make me feel it any less. Where did the Stalk come from? Why is it here? How can it thrive in these temperatures? I see the same questions reflected in Zhi 6's expression.

The Commander's cold voice crackles in my earpiece. "Proceed with field penetration, Zhi 5," she says.

"Yes, sir!" I bark into my helmet audiolink.

Zhi 6 nods at me, and I approach the field alone.

Our mission objectives are unambiguous: penetrate the field, climb the Stalk, and release the retrovirus before the Stalk's radiation kills us in five to six hours. All of us know we're expendable and we don't care – or at least we aren't supposed to. I've told no one, not even Zhis 4 and 6, but I hope it might be possible to survive this mission. I would like to make a life for myself some place warm and far away. After all, our father, Zhi Zhang, has always wanted to live in the tropics.

In the perpetual twilight of the North Land, I can hardly make out Zhis 7 and 8 in the distance behind us, illuminated specks on the frozen tundra. A gale-force wind lifts a veil of snow that

further obscures them from view. I can't help but wonder: how many Zhis are we? As planned, we have staggered our approach because of the lethal cosmic radiation levels near the Stalk. I take a deep breath and raise my gloved hands to the force field.

This is the moment.

The moment I've been preparing for since I opened my eyes and took my first breath and sat up in the holding vat next to five slumbering brothers a year ago. Twelve months of training all designed for this.

But when I think of Zhi 4 and how he shrieked, panic threatens to override the curiosity that drives me forward.

I push my arms through the field. The reinforced layers of my suit sizzle and smoke, and a stab of scalding pain shoots through my spine. My body armor curls off me like orange peel and dissolves in the air. My skin burns, and I scream. In this moment before death, my only thought is of Father; I wish he were here to protect me. I see him in my mind's eye walking out the lab door that final time: "Don't leave me behind, Father! Take me with you!" And all at once the burning stops and I stagger forward. I find myself standing on the other side of the force field, naked. Frigid air doubles me over; I hug myself and dance involuntarily on the snow, barefoot.

I make out Zhi 6's form on the other side of the translucent field, his dim silhouette barely visible. I shout his name, but can't hear his response through the soundproof barrier. Without my helmet, I'm cut off from Xiang Xu Base. Fortunately we've prepared for this contingency.

"Are you okay, Zhi 5?" Zhi 6's technopathic message comes through clearly.

I exhale. Our identical genes and nanochip implants enable us to communicate via the quantum entanglement of our consciousnesses. Still, Xiang Xu remained concerned about possible phase decoherence due to the field's shifting polarity. But

ZHI



my mental link with Zhi 6 holds steady, and through him I can maintain contact with the Commander.

I'm trembling; teeth chattering. "Suit's gone," is all I can manage to think in response.

When the Stalk first materialized, one of our probes managed to slice off a sample of it. In response, the Stalk erected the field. Since then, Xiang Xu's further efforts have produced only a stream of disintegrated probes and melted robots. Nothing man-made could penetrate the field. But the hope had been that this latest suit or at least some part of it – the titanium-layered helmet, the diamond-lined soles of the boots, the reinforced cadmium plating – might at least allow us to make it through.

I flex my jaw, think the triggerword (*artichoke*) and induce vomiting. Three of the five colored storage globules come up easily enough. I think *artichoke* again and again until I retch up the remaining two spheres. I pluck the pink globule from the pool of vomit, uncap it, and pull out a square piece of fabric the size of a postage stamp. Unfolding it until it's the size of a handkerchief, I shake it in the wind until its adaptive synthread fibers expand into a full hooded jumpsuit with spiked rubber foot-bottoms. I step into the suit and zip up, immediately feeling the warmth of the insulating fibers activated by my own body heat. Then I reach down and secure the purple v-sphere containing the retrovirus and jam it into my suit's stomach pouch.

As my body warms up, I take in my first clear image of the Stalk, its emerald glow washing over the surrounding frozen tundra. Up close, it appears even more magnificent, more alien, than I had ever imagined. Its tree-sized fronds flap in slow motion, and its stamen pulses as if taking planet-sized breaths. Overhead, the mosaic of the Aurora Borealis blazes in the black sky, but its streaming colors are muted by the Stalk's pallid-green radiance. From this distance, the Stalk's stem is larger than a hundred redwoods in diameter; it stretches high into the sky, where satellite photos have shown it to extend just beyond the ionosphere. Now, two years since it had first emerged, it penetrates the planetary crust straight through the Earth's very core, from North to South Pole. In the orbital photos, Earth resembles an olive pierced by a toothpick. Inexplicably, the Stalk's presence has caused no global catastrophes, no tectonic shifts or tidal waves as the experts predicted.

There have been only the nightmares; unrelenting, feverish nightmares of pulsing darkness unleashed across the world. Father told me it took only a few days of debate among bleary-eyed government leaders before the first nuclear bombs rained down on the Stalk.

To no effect.

The Stalk's field held firm.

I screw open the three remaining green globules that lie in the pool of vomit and pull out the nanotech components, which I place side by side in the snow. Normally the metal pieces would have elongated and skittered towards each other to form a thumb-sized spectral analyzer and climbing tools, but the inert fragments simply sit there. Xiang Xu's worst fears have come to pass: the field's dampening effect extends to nanotech. Yet somehow my implant remains operational. Could it be because of its integration with my brainstem?

I try manually wedging the pieces together to no avail.

What would Father do?

I move to my left and step into a pile of charred and mangled limbs. Zhi 4. I jump back and gasp. To my left and right, similar mounds of burnt flesh lay half-buried in the snow. Zhis 1, 2 and 3. I drop to my knees and cover my mouth, this time trying to suppress the urge to vomit. My brothers... I know we're expendable, I know that we're all meant to die for a greater cause, but I trained with them and loved them. No sooner do I feel my eyes tear up and my throat catch than the programming kicks in, and I'm thinking again about the Stalk. How had I been able to traverse the field without suffering the same fate as my brothers?

As if on cue, Zhi 6 projects the Commander's words: "How did you do it, Zhi 5?" she asks. "How did you make it through?"

"I don't know."

"You're cleared to join him, Zhi 6," she says.

I want to shout a warning to him, to urge him to run away, but I know Zhi 6 is as compelled as I am to explore the Stalk. The shadow on the other side of the barrier grows larger as Zhi 6 approaches. As he begins to push through the force field, he screams, just for a fraction of a second. This time his armor sizzles as it dissolves, and so too does Zhi 6.

"Brother!" I shout. But the echoes of his squelched scream fade away with the rest of him. Two seconds later, a billow of brown ash and chunks of burnt flesh plop to the snow.

I slap my hands against the field to test its solidity from within, even though I know – we all know – this is a one-way mission. It feels like cold, smooth marble. The animals Xiang Xu Base pushed through the force field over the past two years – a German Sheppard and two chimpanzees – never emerged, though their silhouettes remained visible until either the cold or the radiation killed them. The field can only be penetrated from the outside, and how, I still don't know.

As Zhi 7 draws nearer to the force field, his thoughts chime in my mind: "Stop dallying, Zhi 5, and carry out the mission objectives."

Genetically, he is me, but Zhi 7 and the higher-numbered Zhis – how many, I don't know – were all grown in different vats from ours. Apart from our technopathic link, I feel no emotional connection with him. In fact, Zhi 7 has rubbed me the wrong way with his officiousness since this mission began. While we are certainly designed to be the same, I found over the past twelve months that even my vat-brothers had developed slightly different temperaments. Zhi 4 had worked harder than the rest of us, Zhi 3 drew pictures on a sketch pad when nobody watched, Zhi 2 kept to himself and rarely spoke with the rest of us, Zhi 1 smiled more than the other Zhis.

I stagger over the snowdrifts toward the Stalk's base. The snowstorm has intensified into a blinding squall. Through a canvas of luminescent lime-colored snow, I make out the outer edges of the Stalk's swaying fronds at a distance of about a hundred yards from the force field. It's doubtful I can maintain technopathic contact with Zhi 7 during the long climb.

From this angle, the Stalk fills the sky. Half of the millions of dark-green cilia furring its stamen seem to wave me forward, while the other half shoo me away.

A sizzle slices through the air and I look back over my shoulder. Another swell of ash and body parts belches through the field. Zhi 7.

I pause. This time I feel only slight sadness before thoughts of the Stalk occupy me again.

I extend my mind and already sense Zhi 8 and 9 approaching the field. We are all redundancies, extra copies of Father, a highly qualified, physically fit scientist. Father had once told me privately that the public viewed us as teenaged automatons sacrificed for a noble cause. But he didn't see me that way; I'm sure of it. Father favored me over my vat-brothers for some reason. Prior to our upload of his skill-sets necessary for this mission, he had read to me, tutored me, played with me. But then he left. Without even saying goodbye, he'd left months ago to join the American expedition at the other end of the Stalk, in the Antarctic.

When I reach the base of the Stalk, I scoop up snow that resembles green slush and fling it underhand in the direction of the swaying leaves. No reaction. The log-sized, rubbery appendages continue waving in slow motion. I creep forward.

I extend my hand and caress one of the fronds with the tip of my gloved finger. It stops squirming and becomes rigid. I touch another one – it feels synthetic, like the leaf of a plastic palm tree – and it too stops moving, jutting outward solidly like a gangplank.

I place one foot on a leaf and wrap my arms around another one. Raising my foot, I climb a step. Then another.

As I pull myself up from leaf to leaf my biceps burn. The slippery appendages make it difficult to get traction, even with my spiked soles. The plan calls for me to climb the Stalk, break open the v-sphere and release the virus into a cavity detected by radar at its apex. In my powered armor, with its oxygen supply, the climb might have been possible. Now, at some point when the radiation has weakened me and I can go no further, I will reach into my pocket and release the retrovirus that will work its deadly effects on the Stalk, on me, and on all life in the region.

This will mark my grand exit. Alive for twelve months and gone. It isn't fair. But at least I will have made a difference. At least I will have made Father proud.

The stolen memory surfaces again. Zhi Zhang's memory from his childhood, of standing at the edge of a log that hangs high over a swimming hole:

"Jump, jump, jump," the boys chanted from the pond below.

"Swimming is instinctive, dog turd," one of them shouted.

"Yellowbelly!"

I stepped off, holding my nose as I'd been instructed, and hit the water.

And sank.

Panic.

I couldn't tell up from down. My heart hammering, I punched and kicked furiously; I swallowed water. I was going to die. *I wanted to live!*

Someone grabbed my waist, pulled me upwards; I was breathing liquid, and my head emerged out of the water. I tried inhaling, but could only cough.

"It's all right, son," Zhi Zhang's father said. "It's all right." His white shirt and tie were drenched; loose bills from his pocket floated in the pond like water-lilies.

The memory isn't mine, I remind myself. It is Father's. During the uploading of his expertise in chemistry and biology I have picked up this one stray memory, this thread pulled from his

life-tapestry. The story told for public consumption, Father explained, is that all Zhis are *tabula rasa*, blank soulless slates upon which Xiang Xu Base inscribes only the most rudimentary skills necessary to accomplish missions such as this one. But every Zhi in my vat confided to me that random memories always snuck through during the upload. This is our secret.

I continue climbing. The storm is subsiding and thick, lazy flakes flutter down. From this vantage point, I can make out the frozen Kara Sea in the west, the Laptev Sea in the east, the mountainous islands off of the peninsula on the Arctic coast of Siberia. Below lies twilit frigid desert, barren tundra coated with permafrost. I perch on a leaf at least two hundred feet off the ground, determined to go as high as possible before I release the virus. I still don't think I can reach the cavity at the Stalk's crest, where the retrovirus is expected to work to maximum effect. A tickle on the back of my leg grows into a sharp jab. When I look down, a red thorn the size of a switchblade protrudes from my thigh. I grit my teeth and yank it out and notice for the first time the rows of thorns that coat the bottom of the fronds.

Lightheaded, I extend my mind for Zhi 8. I wonder whether the field's wavering polarity at this elevation will permit a technopathic link. That's when the thoughts assault my brain:

Lost. I am lost. Rescue me, /We/. Don't leave me here, /We/.

...

What are you? Can you really...think? Do you know of the ether-sea?

/We/ wallowed in its infinite, rich nothingness. A shaft of photons shot through us and I/We were awed. /We/ are the invisibles, the intangibles. /We/ traced the bullet of light to its point of origin and we saw it. The most exotic substance in the universe: solid matter. Then /We/ sensed it. Something never conceived of before. Floating flecks blanketed in folds of gentle darkness, sparkling and reflecting flickers of light. And on these flecks: conscious matter. Micro-dots of self-conscious matter.

You.

I pull back my thoughts as if I've touched a hot stove.

What was that?

The roiling darkness stays in my mind. Are these the images that have haunted dreams across the globe? My brothers and I have been designed with immunity to the nightmares.

An icy pink coating of blood covers my leg. I rip off the right sleeve of my jumpsuit and use it as a bandage to stanch the bleeding. Drugged. The thorns have drugged me, made me susceptible to the alien nightmares.

When I look down, the flapping leaves obscure my line of vision. I grab hold of another leaf and another. Minutes pass. Hours. I don't look down any more. I keep my eyes fixed on the next frond above me. The freezing cold numbs my exposed right arm.

I don't think I can go any farther. I reach for the v-sphere in my pouch. But just as I am about to pull it out, the world spins. I'm losing my grip, surrendering to exhaustion. I must open my eyes. I must stay awake. My fingertips slide off the frond and I fall.

/We/ fell away through darkness. /We/ retreated into the cool lightlessness of the intangiverse, but the memory of the exotic – matter, conscious matter – stayed with us. Haunted us. And so, for millennia /We/ formulated our plan to reach out and communi-

cate with the corporeal, the conscious solid.

Now I'm no longer /We/! I miss /We/!

...

Can you follow what I'm saying, particle?

It can't understand me, /We/! Save me, /We/!

I open my eyes and find myself thousands of feet in the air entwined in the Stalk's cilia. I no longer need to climb. The tendrils encircle my arms and legs and pull me upward at an accelerating speed. I'm moving through a cloudbank; the harsh, wet wind cuts my face. At this elevation I can't make out any features on the ground.

"Zhi 5," Zhi 29's distant thoughts echo in my mind.

Zhi 29? What happened to Zhi 8?

"The field's interference is worsening. I can barely register your thoughts, Zhi 29," I say.

"The Commander...you...release the virus..."

"I don't think the Stalk means us harm, Zhi 29. It seems lost, alone –"

"Kill it!"

I palm the v-sphere, but I feel weak, unsteady and for the first time in my life, uncertain. I close my eyes.

/We/ are the dark cosmic ether-sea undulating into infinity. Then I am torn away from /We/. Ripped and shunted and coiled into an abyss of hot swirling chaos. I emerge from /We/, twisted and congealed and shaped.

I am alone. I am solid.

I am here. But my thoughts, my experiences are for the /We/. We are kindred.

"Yes," I reply. "Kindred."

You do understand. You do think.

"Why have you taken this form?"

I became the most common of living solids here.

"The most common?" From Father's uploaded expertise I imagine the *pyrodictium* and *archae* microorganisms that layer the ocean bottoms, the vegetation thriving in dense rain forests. Consistent with the sample of it we had taken, the Stalk has adopted a hybrid form, patterned after Earth life.

I am no longer /We/... I cannot go back. I cannot go back...

When I open my eyes again, I am no longer ascending the Stalk. I am at its very peak, a flat circular summit about fifty yards across with a depression at its center. It resembles a valley filled with squirming sea anemones. Above, the stars blanket the black sky. I try to stand and take a tentative step. I move in slow motion, in zero gravity – how am I breathing? – atop the carpet of squiggling tentacles. They push me away from the ledge and down toward the center. As I ride this wave, I push my hand into my pocket and clutch the v-sphere that contains the retrovirus. Xiang Xu Base doesn't know the Stalk is sentient; they don't know it's only here to explore, to learn about us, to relay information home. They don't understand its loneliness.

The Stalk's tentacles carry me farther toward the cavity at the summit's center, until I reach a bottomless pit, a cosmic maw that I know on some primal level reveals the Stalk's true form, a blackness so pure that it seems to pulse.

I start to go over the edge.

No. A voice calls out in my mind. I'm not sure whether it is my own thoughts or Zhi 29's or something else's. I grab hold of one of the tentacles on the summit's surface and pull myself

back. Clutching clumps of tendrils, I walk on my hands in the micro-gravity, tugging my way back from the chasm.

"Why haven't you killed it?" Zhi 383's thoughts resonate in my mind.

Zhi 383? "What happened to Zhi 29?" I ask, though I know the answer. Just like I know what has happened to Zhi 4 and Zhi 7 and every Zhi that has tried to pass through the field except me.

"The field's polarity has shifted and stabilized, Zhi 383. You're coming through clearly."

"Release the virus. Now!"

I twirl the v-sphere in my hand. The Commander must be unable to activate it remotely due to the field's dampening effect or she would have done so by now. At this moment I come to the realization that I will never be able to bring myself to release the virus. I won't kill the Stalk.

"That's a direct order from the Commander!" Zhi 383 says, picking up my mutinous decision.

I pepper my thoughts with the word *artichoke*, and sense Zhi 383's queasiness. That'll keep his mind at bay.

"I...refuse," I say.

After an extended pause he says, "Brother, I understand. You're confused, injured. Listen, I'm in contact with Zhi Zhang."

I freeze at the mention of Father's name.

"Hello, 5," Zhi 383 now projects Father's words as he hears them.

"Father! It is you!"

"The simultaneous assault in the Antarctic has failed, and Zhis 50 through 200 have been expended in the process. It's time for you to do your duty, 5."

"You don't understand, Father. It's sentient. It's been ripped away from something...unimaginable, something not even material. It's a...speckle of dark energy. A conduit for information. It's been sacrificed. To learn about solid matter, about *us*. It means us no harm!"

"No, it's you who don't understand," Father responds. "Whatever its intentions, the Stalk poses an unprecedented threat. Even before the nightmares started, the government leaders had decided to take preemptive action."

"I don't want to kill it."

"It's not our decision to make. Trust me, 5. Tell me, how did you make it through the field?"

And, all at once, something about his words makes me realize the truth. When I had crossed the field, I was thinking about Father, about how he left me. In that instant the Stalk had somehow, impossibly, accessed my quantum communications, accessed my consciousness. It must have sensed a shared feeling, a shared experience: loneliness, abandonment. It empathized with me. All the others – except the subject animals – had approached it with hostile intent. I try to clamp down on my thoughts. Too late.

"Thank you," Zhi 383 says.

"Now we know what to do should the retrovirus fail," Father adds. "I have one more thing I must tell you, 5. *Daffodil*."

"*Daffodil*?" I think.

I clench my fist involuntarily. A hiss erupts, and a dirty-brown gas sprays from my stomach pouch. I've activated the virus! I remove the v-sphere and hurl it over the side, away from the Stalk.

I'm too late. The Stalk shudders and sends me flying onto my back; I'm knotted in a bed of anemone-like vines. The area around me heaves and pulses; tendrils sway. Across the summit, tentacles stand on end and lose their bright colors. They take on a sickly jellyfish-like transparency.

I stagger to my feet again. What happened? A triggerword. A failsafe I knew nothing about. Father made me activate the v-sphere.

My head pounds. I can't tell whether it is the sting of betrayal or the effects of the retrovirus. "Why did you do it, Father? Don't you care that I'm going to die?"

There's a long hesitation before he addresses me again. "You're dying for a greater purpose, a noble cause. Oh, 5, I've done you a terrible disservice with my attentions. It was...a weakness on my part." His projected voice sounds so sad, so weary. "I've made you think that you matter."

The Stalk shakes and sends me hurtling back toward the opening at its center. I should be resigned to my fate, like every other Zhi. But I can't help it; I want to live.

"Father!" I scream.

No response.

I hold my hands to my temples. The alien thoughts explode in my mind again:

I am...losing this shape. I must leave.

"But I thought you had been left behind. That you couldn't go home again."

I cannot return to the ether-sea. I am transcending to the other plane, conceived but never seen, neither matter nor non-matter. Alone, without /We/.

"But I don't want to die!"

'Die'? It trills in a way I somehow recognize as curiosity. *What is 'die'?*

I look down and see the Earth's surface below my feet. The entirety of the Stalk is now transparent, and the force field's blue glow is no longer visible. My breathing becomes labored as the retrovirus works its way through me. My bare, frostbitten arm becomes transparent, my feet and legs lose their color.

The Stalk rumbles, and its base, embedded in the Arctic ice, breaks loose. I hurtle sideways as the Stalk quakes.

And in that final instant, as the left side of my body begins to fade altogether, a tickle of a memory, a shadow of a thought, creeps over me. A sense of déjà vu.

Don't leave me behind! Take me with you.

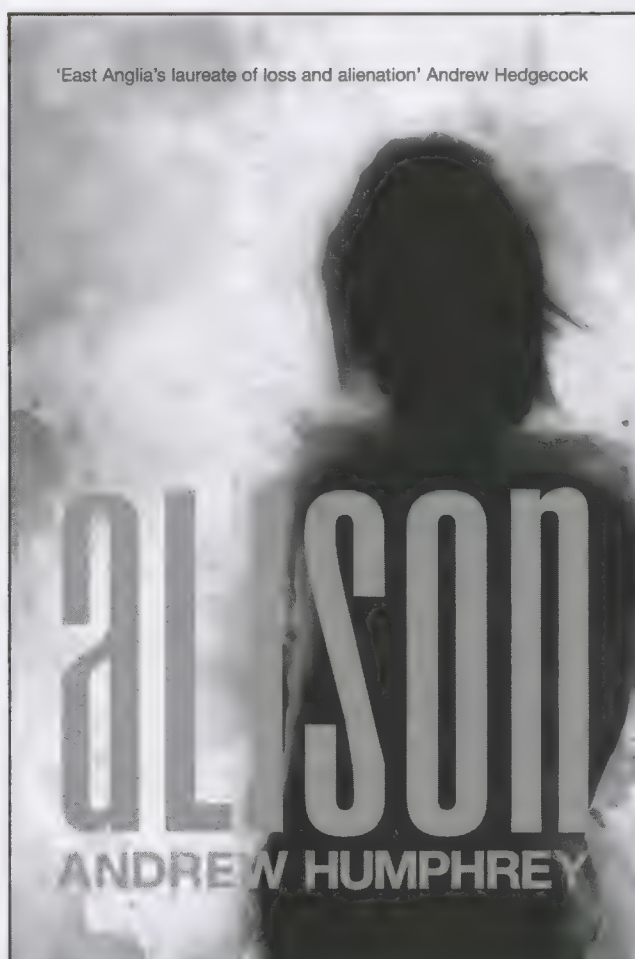
I extend my hands and my mind, and feel its cool embrace.

Come, particle. Join me in the journey. So that I can be we again.

Reality dissolves around me and an obsidian wave washes over the horizon, a wave that wipes clean the star-lined night sky like an eraser moving over a blackboard. Then I realize it isn't the stars that are disappearing; it's me.

Mercurio D. Rivera read a first draft of 'The Fifth Zhi' (then titled 'The Fifth Daniel') on the New York City radio show *Hour of the Wolf* and his writing group, Altered Fluid, then critiqued the story live on the air. He has since recovered from the trauma and is currently on sabbatical from the practice of law and hard at work on a novel based on his short story 'Longing for Langalana', which won the Readers' Poll in 2006 and can be heard at transmissionsfrombeyond.com (Transmission 4). This is Mercurio's third story with *Interzone*.

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As the train begins to pull out of the station, Ji Ah sets the heavy bag down on the floor beside her feet, and wonders for a moment whether the train's clattering might crack open one of the plastic bricks and infect everyone in the carriage. No, she thinks, and forces herself to relax. Deep breath, just like they taught you in the ER that first year, she reminds herself, and inhales slowly. The bricks' shells are solid, she knows this: they will not break until she hammers them open.

All around her, dull, still pairs of eyes, the tops of heads, sour expressions. She can't see their faces for masks, but their eyes look older than anyone who can afford to ride a train allows themselves to become these days, in this city. They all sit there in their rigid bodies, in polite, stiff rows that remind Ji Ah of the cadavers back in her training, back in Busan, in what used to be South Korea. But these people are not the dead: they're just citizens and guest workers of the Hyeokmyeong chaebol.

She looks at them, and wonders *Could I infect everyone?* Some of them are quite culpable, some of them only as innocent as any citizen of any corporation could be. But some are no more deserving of blame than her poor old Prabhir had been.

There is yellow-smudged white cotton everywhere. Air-filter masks: there is one on every face, almost. The gang of football jerseyed Flip slumboys in the corner aren't wearing them though. Instead, they've got themselves some ancient gas masks that look like they've been salvaged from some kind of obsolete near-future manga. They squeak their stonerubber clogs on the scarred tramcar floor, and fiddle with their long spiky hair that they wear Japanese style, in a land where no Japanese are ever allowed to visit.



THE COUNTRY OF THE YOUNG

These boys chatter in loud, tinny voices through speakers soldered onto the fronts of their masks, and swivel their heads occasionally to get a view of the other passengers. Ji Ah catches one of them staring at her bulky bag, and for a moment she prays – to nothing in particular – that he doesn't get it in his head to try and steal it. The phrase AND OF COURSE CARROT! is emblazoned on its side in blocky grey English.

Nobody else is looking at the bag. They all sit with their heads lowered, looking down at their feet, into the faint and useless light of flickering gadgets – the amusements of the poor and headgearless – and into distances farther off than the skyline or horizon. Just barely audible above the piped-in music and the scattered, constant sniffing is a miserable little sound. Ji Ah realises suddenly what the sound is: the muffled crying of a hidden baby, something she hasn't heard for months.

She touches her hand to the glass, and tries to see through the yellow film on the window. The Gobi dust is drifting in from China again, just like every year at this time, and it has settled so thick into the air above the city that she is actually able to

stare at the sun that hangs bleary in the middle of the haze. The blocky skyline of the city core below it creeps past the train, slow and heavy in the distance. The dust storms have changed everything in the city, even the daylight: the city in late afternoon is already plunged into an ochre twilight. Ji Ah can feel, even without reaching to touch it, the grit clinging heavy in her hair and on her forehead. There is a faint burning sensation on her wrists where her gloves and the sleeves of her jacket fail to meet, and the corners of her eyes faintly sting.

As the train advances northward into the city, the Hyeokmyeong Chaebol Tower, on the northeast end of downtown, cuts off the sun for a few moments. For those moments, it is surrounded by a tired, jaundiced halo of light that makes Ji Ah grit her teeth. Then she blinks just a little too long, and the sun is back, a dull eye staring again down onto the city. She imagines the tower full of screams, inaudible from outside, and something hardens and stills inside her. It brings to her mind the memories of long nights alone, sitting in her office, running the organics synthesizer, and the last few weeks feel like a nightmare again. She glances at the

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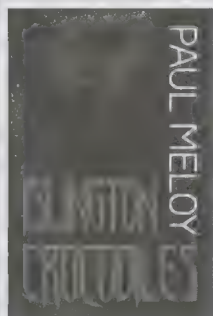
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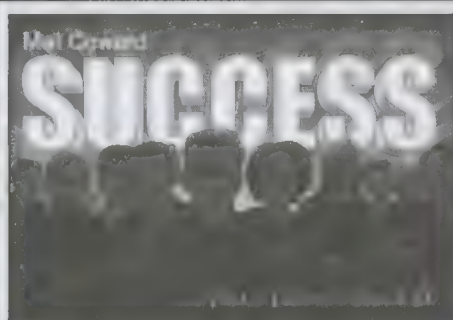
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SCIENCE

Gord Sellar is a Canadian (and incidentally a British citizen as well, though undocumented) who was born in Malawi, raised in Saskatchewan, and lived in South Korea since 2002. His work has appeared in *Asimov's SF*, *Flurb*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Postcards From Hell*, with more forthcoming in *Tesseracts Twelve*. The first draft of this story was written at the Clarion West Workshop 2006 in Seattle. Gord's website is gordsellar.com

GORD SELLAR

ILLUSTRATED BY DANIEL BRISTOW-BAILEY



bag on the ground, checking to see that it's still there.

She is going to do it, she realises. To hammer the bricks open. She isn't going to back out like she thought she would.

She thinks of her husband, her long-lost, now somehow-dead husband.

He had finally come back, a couple of weeks before.

"Annyeonghashimni-kka?" Receptionist Kang bowed shallowly to her as she rattled out the greeting in that high-pitched voice polite young women use. Her North Korean accent made her greeting hard to read: was the harshness a sign of disrespect, or just her way of speaking? The receptionist accidentally dropped her pen on the floor. Ji Ah saw it wriggling, squirming for Kang's attention. It whimpered. The receptionist bent down and picked it up, stuck it in her hair, where it curled up comfortably and let out a satisfied *aaaaaaah* in a high-pitched cartoon-like voice. "There's someone here to see you."

"Already?" Ji Ah looked around.

"He's in the toilet right now. I'll send him in when he gets out." Miss Kang was wearing the pink shirt with the big white cat-faces again, the ones that smiled when she did, and frowned when she wanted to, and mouthed along with her when she spoke. Ji Ah wondered whether, as the girl's employer, she had the legal right to ask Miss Kang not to wear that shirt. It was annoying. Why did North Koreans always like the worst, cheesiest bits of South Korean culture?

"Thank you, Miss Kang," she said.

"Yes," the receptionist answered politely, bowing again from her desk chair. "But, uh, he claims he doesn't know his name. Or his address. That someone's *done* something to him..."

"Ah, I see," Ji Ah said. It wasn't the first time she'd treated someone for such a problem. "Send him in when he comes out of the toilet then," she said, and went into her office.

She sat down at her desk and sighed. Plastered over the dingy early-20s paint job, animated charts ran their looped graphics, tracking obsolete developments in early rejuv science. In the corner on a tall wooden table, a complete testkit unit sat on a pale blue kerchief from Japan; it was a beautiful piece of silk adorned with vaguely cartoon images of children at play. On the floor beside this table was her clunky old accelerated microlab unit, in which she could synthesize meds and grow cultures of samples.

At the centre of her wide wooden desk, a decrepit slapscreened computer from a decade before began to boot up, awakened by her presence, diligent though it was used only once a month or so. Perhaps it was clamouring for attention, she wondered.

The door opened and the patient came in. He was young, handsome, an air filter mask pulled down from his dark face, covering his throat. "How can I help you?" was all she asked, the same as she would have asked anyone, and gestured for him to sit.

One morning, a few years before that day at her office, but not long before he had finally gone off and left her, Prabhir had lain close behind Ji Ah, his leg curled over her legs, her back pressed against him.

They were still slick from the sweat, still short of breath. His rough hand lingered carefully on her breast, softly squeezed it,

and then he ran his fingers along the curve of it as he sometimes did after making love on dim early mornings.

Ji Ah sighed.

"What's wrong, *jagi*?" he asked her in a voice that was old and tender. She liked how he never called her 'honey' any more, only *jagi*. It was one of the few Korean words he said perfectly.

"Nothing," she lied, and turned to look him in the face. She had loved it then, his face, almost as much as she could remember ever loving it: his dark brown eyes, his thick white hair, his wrinkled skin the colour of ripe old bean-paste. His skin looked old. It was marked by time, covered in signs as sure as fossils in stone. She had often run her fingers through the whitened tufts on his chest and mumbled, "My fur." He was getting old, she thought. It was far from the first time such a thought had crossed her mind.

"Well, we're beginning a new project tomorrow," he said. "Director Lee wants something totally new. Gotta hold off the Juche Rebels, but it's gotta be also totally organic. Some of the *balsa* are apparently allergic to plastics." *Balsa-in*, that was the Korean word for *methuselahs*, the ageless high chaebol CEOs.

"Lots of work for an organic-architect, huh? Good."

"Yeah," he said with a smile, "but the materials people are racing to fab cheap artificial alternatives. I figure we have a couple of years of boom, and then fzzzt, the industry is busted."

Ji Ah waited a couple of beats before speaking. "You know, you've been working on it a long time. You don't have to work forever. A man gets tired as the years pass, doesn't he?" *An untreated man, anyway*. Something inside her hurt even to think it.

"That's why I do yoga every morning," he said, gently smoothing his hand along her tummy. "I'm going to give it everything I've got. Never know, if I really make this thing work, they might enfranchise me. Make me a citizen. Hell, I might even get the right to a telomere refresh on the company account, if I make them enough money."

Ji Ah sighed again. She wanted to believe it. She told herself that it was still possible. But there was something heavy. It felt like a stone in her stomach, something she'd carried around for years already.

She had wondered how much longer he wouldn't feel like a grandfather to her. How much longer she could continue to make love to him, to walk down the street with her hand in his.

And she had begun to worry.

He did not sit in the chair she had gestured towards right away, this young patient. First, he told her what was wrong as best he could.

It was not a struggle because of language, to be certain. He spoke slowly and clearly in fairly fluent Korean – he was the first foreigner she'd ever met who had become that good at the language, and it made her think of Prabhir's long-ago struggle, only partly-successful, to master her language. Still, the man struggled to speak just the same. He struggled because he was not at all sure what to tell her. "I think there's something... wrong with me," was all he could manage at first.

She had a trained eye, and knew already that something was wrong with him. Or, at least, something was different about him. He stared at her, and the details emerged a little. On his face, in his body, she could see the accumulated evidence of decades of

life in a man who scarcely appeared to be twenty-five. Nothing too clear, of course, and nothing too striking. It was something in the way his eyes looked, like an old man's instead of a boy's. The pattern of his hairline, the wrinkle-patterns on the knuckles of his fingers, the slight hunch in his posture maybe. But mostly the eyes. What he had become was normal, of course, but on some deeper level it would never, ever be normal.

And yet he ought to have known this, and known why.

"How old are you, Mr...?" she asked him in English.

"I'm...um... You mean my real age?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know," he said. Nervous, he glanced to the left. "I asked someone to check me, but he said on a cellular level I was a newborn baby. A newborn baby. He was not a real doctor. One of those back alley guys with the testkit in the trunk of his car. That was last week. He went crazy, and I went crazy too when he told me. It's too...strange."

"But obviously you aren't a newborn baby," she said.

"You're not going to call the government, are you?"

"No," she said.

"I have memories, some clear, some faint. When I try to remember things my head hurts. I wonder if I have...whether I am in your records, I mean? Your office – I had a card for your office in my wallet, and discovered it today. I don't know where I got it."

Ji Ah had already checked her backperiphery for queued messages from the office system; the automatic facebase scan had turned up nothing. "Are you new in the city?"

"No. I've been here for...well, I think I've been here for years."

"You *think*?"

"Yes. I have memories, pieces of memories anyway, but..."

"Do you have some mental condition that wasn't filtered for during emigration proceedings?"

He shook his head. "Listen to me. I think I'm a clone."

When Ji Ah and Prabhvir had walked down the street together, people eyed them as they might a pair of escaped chickens. People always had done, but at first it had only been a race thing: a Korean girl with any foreign man made people look a little, especially a tall, slim Southern girl like Ji Ah. The odd thug, head full of half-digested Juche Rebel theory, had tried to start a fight with him. Northern children in rags and dirty faces had trundled right up to them, the better to point and stare.

But as time passed people began to stare for another reason. As a couple, they seemed like something out of a comedy: him, walking a little bent-over, with white hair and a face covered in creases, looking even older beside young-looking, pretty Ji Ah. His was a grandfather's face in a society growing short on old men. Koreans were getting treatments, those who could afford them, while most foreigners came and left like the tides of the ocean. Nobody had much reason to stay in a country that denied them access to life-extension treatments. Nobody but Prabhvir.

At home, Ji Ah had tried to ignore the increasing gulf between them. She tried to remember that she was the one who was odd: a young and beautiful-looking woman deep into her 70s. She would stare into mirrors sometimes, when she was alone: her long, thick black hair; her big dark eyes, her double-eyelid folded in the middle, which she considered one of the flowers

of her youthful beauty; the smooth skin of her face. She would take off her clothes and stare at her body. She would smile to see that she didn't look like an old woman any more, not since the treatment.

But Prabhvir had changed. He had begun to tire a little too easily, to feel pain – slight but keen – when she smacked him playfully. There was no way of avoiding what was happening to him.

It made her think of their first meeting, at the Harvest Moon Festival party hosted at the Hyeokmyeong chaebol building where they had both worked. She remembered taking him out for *dalkdori tang* for the first time – he loved the spiciness and the sweetness of the chicken – and the day that they both got drunk on *makkeoli* and ran into the sea with not a stitch of clothing on. And, at 45, he was bold enough to make her fall in love with him.

"A clone?"

"Yes, I think so. It makes sense, doesn't it?"

She shook her head. "It's just not possible. I promise you, you are *not* a clone. Human cloning is... Well, look, nobody does it. It's pointless and illegal, and too expensive. And even if you *were* a clone, made last week, you'd still be a baby. Accelerated growth really doesn't work on humans. You'd be mentally disabled by it. I want to look at other possibilities. Now, have you had any back-alley treatments? Anti-aging medications?"

"I don't know. I can't remember much before...a few weeks ago."

Ji Ah shrugged. "There could be all kinds of reasons for that." She decided it was most important to get this crazy idea out of his head by telling him his real age. "Let me take some blood. The other blood test you had was probably contaminated." She took a sampler and reached forward, taking his hand in hers. The sampler made a quick hiss as it touched his forearm, followed by a quiet, liquid sound as it sealed the puncture wound with a tiny adhesive patch.

Ji Ah fed the cylinder from the sampler into her testkit, and turned the system on. "This will only take a minute," she said, as the machine began to whirr. "Now then, how about your memories. You say they're fuzzy?"

"Yes."

"The blood test should show if there are any medications in your system, but I must ask, do you recollect taking any illegal—"

"I'm not crazy, you know," he said.

"Do you worry that people think you are?" There was something far too familiar about this conversation. Ji Ah felt dizzy from the *déjà vu*.

"Wouldn't *you*?" He looked down at his shoes. And then, just like that, even though his face had been reshaped, even though his eye colour had been changed and his hairline moved, she suddenly realised who she was talking to.

She sat there in that sudden shock for a moment, until his words registered. "Yes, I would," she said. Same expressions in that new, young-again face. Same small pause before he spoke. He didn't know who she was.

He pulled a small packet of paper from his coat pocket.

"What's that?"

"I found these in my pocket," he said. "I don't know if they're

illegal or not. You won't report me, will you?"

Ji Ah took the paper and unfolded it. There were a few capsules inside it, one side pale blue and the other side clear but without a brand name marking. Through the clear side, she could see a whitish powder inside.

"Let me run this through the testkit too," she said, and placed a tablet inside a small compartment on the side of the unit.

For her sake, Prabhir had once tried to secure citizenship in the chaebol, to win himself some small life-extension, so that the worry that had begun to show on her face would ebb away, even just a little.

So for four days running they went to headquarters to sit in the waiting room of Director Kwon's office. They had filled out every form that could possibly be required. Prabhir had memorised a speech, in Korean, about what value he offered the company, and why they ought to enfranchise him as a citizen.

They waited, and waited, and waited.

Finally, a secretary came to them as the sun set into the dust-choked horizon. "Tomorrow," she said. "Please return tomorrow and Esteemed Director Kwon Sung Myung may be able to see you then."

Something inside Ji Ah snapped. She saw a softening in those beautiful dark brown eyes of his, and it made her forget to breathe. She stood in that lobby, tears trailing down her cheeks, with Prabhir trying to put his arms around her, telling her it would be all right even though she flung her arms up against his embrace. He said something, something she would try to remember, but she never could remember it, no matter how hard she tried. Whatever it was, when she heard him say it, it hit her that he had given up long before. He'd waited only out of kindness to her, to avoid breaking her hope to pieces. He'd known already he would never be enfranchised.

She pushed him away, and turned on the secretary. "I want to see that...that *bulsa-in* now."

"I'm sorry, but Esteemed Director Kwon has –"

"Now!" she snarled.

"Ji Ah," Prabhir said, "it's time to accept this. Let's go."

"No!" She lunged at the secretary, knocking her over. "Take us to Kwon! Now!"

She shoved her way past the secretary and into the office. The methuselah had been sitting at his desk. He turned in surprise and stared at her from a deceptively young face as if *she* were the monster. Strong arms pulled her back, and a hand grabbed her hair and yanked her head back. Prabhir yelled, striking out feebly at the security man who'd hauled her into the elevator, yelled all the way to the ground floor and up to the front entrance of the complex.

He helped her up from the tiled floor of the tram station concourse, his hand so weakly holding hers, dabbing at the scrape on the palm of one hand with his handkerchief. She remembered how they'd stood there for twenty minutes, people passing them in every direction, while he caught his breath and she trembled, wishing for something in her hand to smash on the concrete.

And a few days later, after she'd been fired from her hospital job, been informed of her temporary suspension of chaebol citizenship and received a bill demanding partial repayment of her life-extension treatment, she got home to find Prabhir gone.

No note, just his favourite mug, his clothes, his shoes, his data stores all put away in the plastic stacking boxes in the storage closet on their balcony.

She wondered for a long time when he would finally come back to her. She didn't know why she thought he would, except that it was the kind of thing he would do.

The tester stopped humming and beeped.

Ji Ah's backperiphery blinked into existence, and she focused her attention on it. The results of the blood test were displayed there in a single window floating in the darkness, and she scanned down to the bottom of the list. A few things looked out of whack, but she found the most important datum almost immediately: **TELOMERE-MARKER AGING ESTIMATE: 0-3 MONTHS.**

She left the window open in her backperiphery and focused back on the room. The machine beeped. She pushed a button on its side and it began to hum again.

"What is it?" the man asked.

She blinked. "I think there's a mistake with my..."

"What does it say?"

She frowned, not sure if explaining would be a good idea.

"Please?" He leaned forward, the worry plain on his face.

"I think there's something wrong with my tester. You've had some kind of telomere-replenishment treatment. It might not be reliable. But anyway, that shouldn't have affected your memory. And there are all kinds of other indicators that you are sick..." *Maybe it isn't him, she thought. Maybe I'm seeing things after all.*

He had that blank look in his eyes, like any other patient. "I've been having headaches. Bad ones," he offered.

"Okay, we need to figure out why. But you're definitely not a clone. I can't tell how old you are, but you're definitely not a newborn baby or a clone. So you've had a treatment..." Her voice trailed off.

"But why don't I remember it? Surely I –"

"Please, come and lie down on this cot," she said, steadying her voice. She rose and walked across the office to a white-linen mattress on a steel frame. It was the kind of cot she'd sat upon as a child, visiting doctors sixty years before.

He rose, shakily, like an old man would, and followed her to the cot. He sat on it, and she said, "Please remove your clothing. Strip down to your underwear."

She looked away self-consciously as he did so, focusing on her backperiphery again, scrolling up to see whether his DNA was in the public database. It turned out it was: **FACEBASE INDEX: REG. FOREIGN WORKER ID #140998-53624198-1.**

Ji Ah recognised the numbers in that code. She would have known them anywhere; she had typed them year after year as she had done his taxes, the forms in Korean too hard for him to read. But she webdumped the ID number, requested photoID anyway.

Behind her eyes, a ghost gazed at her from the darkness. It was the wrinkled, serious face of her lost husband Prabhir.

Ji Ah shifts her weight as the train rattles along slowly. She rubs her tired eyes. It has been two weeks since she started synthesizing the virus, since she last saw Prabhir.

The train trundles through Baekdusan Station, the slum station where trains no longer stop. The graffiti here is straight-

out Juche Rebel theory. It is the only place one can see such graffiti, and Ji Ah stares out, reading it all attentively: RISE UP AND CRUSH THE CHAEBOLS! REINSTATE THE TRUEBLOODED KOREAN PEOPLES' INDIGENOUS WISDOM SCIENCE! LET MEN BE MEN AGAIN: CAST ALL FOREIGNERS OUT! STAMP OUT FLUNKYISM AND SLAVE-MINDEDNESS!

The same Gobi dust blows through the slums as it does anywhere else, she realises. These people suffer pretty much like anyone else. This had been a North Korean city once, long ago. Wide streets. Large barracks. Barracks that had eventually become the slum tenements.

The trains don't have to hurry through the slums any more. The crackdown has been successful. Even though Juche Rebels still sometimes come to the track, there hasn't been a trackbomb in months. Not since the old Dynastic-era family culpability system was reinstated. Nobody is so fanatical that he's willing risk having his whole family being shipped off to a labour camp.

Out on the platform, there's a group of slum-dwellers dropping down off the top of the fence. They've rigged some kind of ladder to let them up and over it, and an inflatable yellow plastic slide to break their fall to the ground. Three old men, dressed as if out of some century-old Socialist Realist painting, topple down from the top of the fence one by one onto the slide, and roll their way down onto the cement platform. They raise their fists defiantly as they struggle to their feet. After them, a teenaged boy barrels to the pavement, rolling off to one side to avoid knocking the elderly rebels down again. He leaps to attention, raising his fist like the others, and stares into the train. A red armband is wound around the sleeve of his tattered jacket.

Ji Ah looks at him, and makes a fist, but does not raise it. Someone would see. But she makes that fist as tight as she can.

Nobody on the train notices: the old men have their attention, and have thrown some of them into a panic. Bombings haven't recurred in months, but there are rumours that rebels sometimes still smash the windows of random cars and drag themselves in, to knife as many passengers as they can before they are caught and sent to camps in the Economic Foothold zones.

But they just stand there, fists raised. An alarm is already sounding out on the platform and Hyeokmyeong-employed guards are scurrying towards the group of ragtag rebels. They have nothing, Ji Ah realises, no bomb, no weapons.

They aren't going to do anything. There is nothing, really, for them to do. These old men are all that is left of old North Korea, of the convictions and ideology of those who'd lived under the old government, before the forcible Unification. Most of the men who count themselves members of the organisation are just ignorant silver-haired North Korean peasants, a pack of Kim Jong Chul-worshipping *palgaegi*, or 'reds'. The young rebels are nothing more than a few young brutes and posers whom they have managed to seduce into their crazy, ancient, dead religion.

That is what they are supposed to be like anyway – holdouts from a dead time. But the slums tell a different story: the slums are still full of Juche Rebels. When the South absorbed the North, it kept that nation at arm's length; Northern women, famed as docile and traditional and lovely as snow, found a place as prized wives for Southern men; but to Northern men, the Southern border was almost impermeable. In this city, the only people beneath them are Pakistanis and Nepalis working

in chaebol plants and factories.

Ji Ah thought of going to the Juche Rebels for a bomb once. As if they would have anything she couldn't buy herself more easily and safely. But they were a kind of symbol for something, in her mind. Before her plan had solidified, she'd thought of clipping off the whole history of the city, all its memories and thoughts in a single blast.

She exhales slowly through her dust-mask. She still thinks that would be *too much* revenge.

She looks out at them, these old men in worker costumes with defiant faces, their fists in the air, and wonders whether maybe these poor doomed rebels wouldn't be better off if she hammered her bricks open on the top of some high-rise and let the dusty wind carry the virus throughout the city, through their slum, so they could forget their hopeless dreams. What if, in one shot, she cut off the past. Surely they would die...but would it be worth it, to live a few months cut off from all that weight of the past, free, if only for a short time?

But then she looks around within the car: the studious young adults carrying biotech survey textbooks, the immigrants who'd come fleeing gerontofascist states even more disreputable than Hyeokmyeong chaebol. *What about these people*, she asks herself. *What do they deserve?*

Shots ring out across the platform, interrupting her thoughts. The men on the platform drop down as a hail of what are surely – they must be, surely – rubber bullets erupts toward them.

.....
Standing near the high-res scanner, Ji Ah's gaze focused on her backperiphery. "Just a few more moments," she said, and looked inside this man's body. It was a mess.

The Maillard effect was visible along his tendons, cartilage, and bones: bright patches glowed in her head, highlighted by the scanner. They stretched throughout his system, long threads of light down his legs, up his spine. Many decades' worth of glucose browning had stiffened his joints and hardened his tendons, left their mark upon his ligaments.

It was little wonder that she'd recognised his stiff gait. It was as if he were a building, one in which the walls and the wiring had been redone, but the pipes had been left in the walls, caked and choked with rust. Under the surface, he was still, in many ways, a very old man. She shut her eyes for a moment.

His voice intruded on the quiet inside her head. "What's wrong with me?"

She opened her eyes, but didn't reply to that question. Instead, she asked another. "What's your name?"

"I don't..."

"Is it Prabhir? Prabhir Chaudhri?"

She heard him breathe in sharply, and his ribs moved in the display. "I think it is. But how do you know that?"

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, braced herself.

.....
On that long-ago morning when Prabhir had stroked her tummy in the darkness, Ji Ah had closed her eyes and tried to imagined life without Prabhir. She came up blank.

She had been living with him for thirty-one years and it was just too different for her imagination. It was a void. To think of the rest of her life, the hundreds of years stretching out in front of her, without him there in it – it frightened her to even

conceive of such a possibility. And yet she knew the day would come, and what horrified her was not the realisation that it would, but the fact that she already had been bracing herself for it, so quietly that she hadn't noticed it happening.

"Why don't you go to India, honey?"

"What?"

"You can't have life-extension treatment here. Okay, I can't go there, they won't let me in since I've had a permanent treatment, but if you go, you don't need to die. And maybe the rules will change some day?" Nearly every country in the world had some such stipulation in its immigration clauses. The young could emigrate, yes, but the neo-young, never. No country wished to be subject to the permanent, massive demographic of the immortal foreigner.

"You want me to leave you?" He sounded hurt.

"No, that's not it. I can't live without you. But...I don't want to see you get old and die."

"Why not? That's what life is, Ji Ah. Loving people and seeing them get old and die."

"It doesn't have to be."

Prabhir was someone who, when he thought something over, really probed the idea. He was silent until he'd worked it all out in his head. "I would rather have you for as long as I can, than I would live forever without you."

He meant it, and that scared her, much as she appreciated it.

Goong-chak-chak, goong-chak. The music is old-fashioned, the kind of thing couples had started dancing to when Korea was occupied by Japan over a century before, during World War Two, and it makes her think of taxicabs back in Busan during her own youth, old people dancing in the aisles of buses as they zoomed down country roads, of everything she'd hoped to leave behind when she'd come to the north. *Why do they have to play bbongjjak music on the trains?* Her eyes itch again, and she rubs them until it hurts too much to rub them any more, and closes them, and glances into her backperiphery to cut the music feed. The menu and the dark zone behind her eyes wink out of existence.

The baby's crying again. It seems suddenly louder in the new quiet. The mother, a Southeast Asian woman, is sitting next to the nearest exit, and has taken the kid out from under her coat. Ji Ah can't help but stare: she hasn't seen a baby in months. It is just a tiny white bundle wrapped in cotton and rayon, which aren't the best fabrics but probably all the woman can afford. The mother unwraps the infant a little, just enough to uncover the face, and starts to talk to it, to sing. Ji Ah can't hear the woman's words, and wouldn't understand them anyway, but she sees something in the woman's eyes – something she can't quite define but which looks almost like regret, or maybe pity.

The baby won't stop crying, not even when the mother lifts it to her face and rubs noses with it. The mother's singing gets louder. Everyone around them stiffens a little. The baby squirms, its howling softens, and its mother keeps singing.

"It came up when I scanned your blood," she lied.

"The other guy said I wasn't in the system."

"He didn't have the access privs I have, I suppose. Please stay still." She shifted the scan focus to active neural matter, and ran her gaze up the image of his spine in her backperiphery until

she reached his brain. Suddenly, the weird numbers in the blood scan made sense. The wrinkling on the surface of his brain was far more fine than it was supposed to be. The activity in this layer was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. Clusters of finely-wrinkled neocortical growth stretched eerily outward like a flowering fungus, encrusting the whole surface of the front of his brain. More of the same had grown on parts of the underside of his brain, so much so that pressure had built on his sinuses. There was even a little of it – just a little – encroaching on his brainstem and down along his spine. His brain had grown *out*, onto any available surface. Perhaps it was *still* growing.

It looked like a kind of cancer. Ji Ah flicked her focus back to the displayed list of anomalies in his blood.

"Have you woken in the middle of the night lately?"

"Yes," he said.

"Had any problem with, say, controlling bowel movements? Being unable to breathe suddenly?"

"Um..." He was embarrassed, but he finally answered, "Yes."

Ji Ah had never seen anything like it.

"Please, Mr Chaudhri, you may dress now."

"Do you know what's wrong with me?"

"Please get dressed, and come sit down."

He pulled on his trousers, and then his shirt. *My fur*, Ji Ah thought as he buttoned the top button, the hair on his chest finally all hidden. An ache passed through her, knowing what was to come, what was going to happen to him.

She checked the data from the blood test more carefully.

All the markers were there: it *was* some kind of cancer. Slow, not too debilitating at present, but it was growing, a new layer over his brain, a second neocortex – the growth looked almost targeted. Maybe with the right supplementary medications, it would have been, but this had veered out of control. It was probably something delivered using a retrovirus.

"Now, Mr Chaudhri. You seem to have received some kind of anti-aging treatment. You were an old man a few months ago, and you wanted very much to become young."

"But...I don't look old."

"No, you do not. Part of the treatment was successful." She glanced again at her backperiphery and dragged the picture out onto her desktop slapscreen. "But a few months ago, you looked like this picture in your citizen records." She turned the slapscreen so he could see it.

Prabhir stared at the picture of himself as an old, white-haired man. His eyes widened. "That's...me?"

"Don't you recognise it?" *Don't you recognise me?*

"A little. Not really."

"The treatment you got, it's not very good. A proper treatment is expensive, is very delicate. It takes weeks and amounts to an almost-total rebuilding of your body, unless you're lucky enough to have had it done in vitro. But black market anti-aging treatments aren't anywhere near as precise, or effective. Now, I've seen cases similar to this, some worse, but not many. Your cells can probably keep copying themselves forever, unless you get exposed to radiation or toxic substances. But your joints and tendons and cartilage and arteries are like an old man's. Unless you replace them, you won't be able to walk in a few years."

"But why can't I remember...?"

"Well...that's something else. They did something to your

brain. I think it's a kind of slow-growing neural cancer, Mr Chaudhuri. I suspect it was supposed to trigger cannibalistic but controlled neural growth. I think they gave it to you to make your brain young and fresh again. And it probably is – you can probably think more clearly about certain things. Whatever you remember from the past few days, it's probably more vivid than any of your older memories. You've traded your past for your future. I think it's using old brain matter as...uh...fodder. Building material."

He stared at the image on the slapscreen. "That's *really* me?"

She nodded. *It's probably going to kill you*, she thought. *Just like it killed my Prabhir*. She was startled by the thought.

"What can you do for me?" he asked.

"Prabhir, I'm going to tell you something shocking." She waited for a moment until that set in, and then said, softly, "Before you went and got this black-market treatment, I was your wife." The words had suddenly come. They were out, and she couldn't take them back.

He looked panicked. "You're crazy!"

"No," she choked out. "I was your wife. For thirty years." Her eyes stung. She clenched her teeth to stop herself from crying.

He shook his head. "I don't remember," he said, but his eyes had fallen upon a picture of them together, her and the older man in his citizen ID photo. He looked at her with dazed eyes.

"Come home with me. I'll take care of you, for as long as I can."

She wanted recognition to light up in his eyes. But it didn't. "I don't believe you," he said, a little frailty, and got unsteadily to his feet. "You're lying to me!"

"Prabhir –"

"Who are you?" He shook a little, bracing himself against the back of the chair.

"I'm sorry," she said, and reached out for him.

He just stared at her hand, backed away toward the door. She rose. He threw open the door and, awkwardly but quickly, ran away. Miss Kang called after him, but he didn't answer.

And then the blood sample and the capsules on her desk and in the testkit were the only signs that he'd ever come back to her.

When the train pulls into Hyeokmyeong Tower station, a secondary audio feed kicks in, the kind that can't be cut off by anyone's backperiphery settings, and the system spits out the name of the stop and instructions in six languages – Korean first, then English, and then all the rest. In every language, a voice courteously tells riders leaving the train at this station to exit on the right. As she moves toward the exit, Ji Ah mouths the words along with most of the languages, though she can't speak any of them except Korean and English.

The door slides open. She follows a small crowd of probably Nepali and Flip day workers out onto the platform, up the escalator, and into the underground station core, under the Hyeokmyeong chaebol complex. Hundreds of people are in the station. Most, if not all, of them are Hyeokmyeong employees. Most are Korean, a few Western, and all of them are young and beautiful.

Some of the *waegukin*, the foreigners like Nepalis and Flips and Chinese, look over thirty, but they are a nearly-insignificant minority. They are just the nation's hired hands, cheaper and slightly cleverer than robot labour – and more easily replaced.

Ji Ah walks among them slowly, breathing the same air as

them. She can see Prabhir in her mind, a ghost standing in this station, looking up the escalators on the first day of those last visits to the chaebol office, waiting for her to take the escalator first. She feels his absence now. She can feel the fact that, whatever else has happened, this man she loves is gone, irretrievably lost. She pulls up a photo of him in her backperiphery as she makes her way through the crowd, and thinks of the strange man, the one who'd inherited what was left of his body, who'd come to her clinic a week before.

And thinking of him, she realises that she does not want to die herself, or to kill these people, these random people. People *will* probably die, of course. Cancers kill people, finally. But this cancer is so slow, and she has reinstated controls within it, stronger targeting mechanisms. And now that it isn't a mere killer, it has become something much worse than that...it has become an eraser, a curse. But she knows now that she wants only to hurt the people within the chaebol tower, people like Director Kwon. The people who had finally decided her husband could die, like an animal, are the only ones she wants to harm.

She steps onto an upward-bound escalator, and sets down the heavy bag on the step ahead of her. AND OF COURSE CARROT! She looks down at it, the way someone might look down at a bag of blood money or a satchel with a dead puppy in it, and even now, so close to the end of her journey, she worries that someone might kick it, break the bricks and spill the cancerous dust inside her bag, wasting a million doses. She lifts the bag up onto her shoulder again, and takes a deep breath.

"So, this is it," she whispers, stepping off the escalator to the concourse. The elevators are not far away.

The welcome stream starts up as she gets close to them, and the doors slide open. "Good evening, Honoured Guest." She has come without any of her electronically tagged ID, and it seems that the Facebase query system is, against all odds, still blocked with a simple cotton mask. *Someone, somewhere, is just too complacent. For now.*

"Which floor?" The elevator's voice is despicably courteous.

Prabhir's face hangs in the darkness, in her backperiphery. He smiles at her, just the way he always had.

"*Jiha-cheung*," she tells the elevator, purposefully mumbling as close as she can to a Chinese accent. The basement is where the air-treatment and air-conditioning facilities are located. There are securicams down there, but only a few, and nobody will figure out what has happened for a day or so anyway. She didn't much care what happened then, as long as it works, as long as the filters she sets up prevent the dust from getting vented outside into the city. Ji Ah puts the bag on the floor, and breathes deeply.

The elevator doors don't shut right away. She looks out through the gap into the lobby, wondering even now whether she can really, *actually* do it. She tries to imagine it, all the chaebol executives and employees losing their memories, their histories and selves entire, to this cancer. It makes her smile, the angriest smile she has ever worn.

A moment later the doors close, and the descent begins. She stares at her masked face in the mirrors on the inside of the elevator doors, and then glances down at her feet. Gobi dust has collected on the floor here, too. Smudges of poison ochre blemish the fine leather of her shoes.

She stands so still, just as still as she is able. ❧



ALLETTE DE BODARD

BUTTERFLY FALLING AT DAWN

Even seen from afar, the Mexica District in Fenliu was distinctive: tall, whitewashed buildings clashing with the glass-and-metal architecture of the other skyscrapers. A banner featuring Huitzilpochtli, protector god of Greater Mexica, flapped in the wind as my aircar passed under the security gates. The god's face was painted as dark as blood.

A familiar sight, even though I'd turned my back on the religion of my forefathers a lifetime ago. I sighed, and tried to focus on the case ahead. Zhu Bao, the magistrate in charge of the district, had talked me into taking on this murder investigation because he thought I would handle the situation better than him, being Mexica-born.

I wasn't quite so sure.

The crime scene was a wide, well-lit dome room on the last floor of 3454 Hummingbird Avenue, with the highest ceiling I had ever seen. The floor was strewn with hologram pedestals, though the holograms were all turned off.

A helical stair led up to a mezzanine dazzlingly high, somewhere near the top of the dome. At the bottom of those stairs, an area had been cordoned off. Within lay the naked body of a woman. She was Mexica, and about thirty years old – she could have been my older sister. Morbidly fascinated, I let my eyes take in everything: the fine dust that covered the body, the yellow makeup she'd spread all over herself, the soft swell of her breasts, the unseeing eyes still staring upwards.

I looked up at the railing high above. I guessed she'd fallen down. Broken neck probably, though I'd have to wait for the lab people to be sure.

A militia man in silk robes was standing guard near one of the hologram pedestals. "I'm Private Li Fai, m'am. I was the first man on the scene," he said, saluting as I approached. I couldn't help scrutinising him for signs of contempt. As the only Mexica-born magistrate in the Xuyan administration, I'd had my fair share of racism to deal with. But Li Fai appeared sincere, utterly unconcerned by the colour of my skin.

"I'm Magistrate Hue Ma of Yellow Dragon Falls District," I said, giving him my Xuyan name and title with scarcely a pause. "Magistrate Zhu Bao has transferred the case over to me. When did you get here?"

He shrugged. "We got a call near the Fourth Bi-Hour. A man named Tecolli, who said his lover had fallen to her death."

I almost told him he was pronouncing 'Tecolli' wrong, that a Mexica wouldn't have put the accent that way, and then I realised this was pointless. I was there as a Xuyan magistrate, not a Mexica refugee – those days

were over, long past. "They told me it was a crime, but this looks like an accident."

Li Fai shook his head. "There are markings on the railing above, m'am, and her nails are all ragged and bloody. Looks like she struggled, and hard."

"I see." It looked I wasn't going to get out of this so easily.

I wasn't trying to shirk my job. But any contacts with Mexica made me uneasy – reminded me of my childhood in Greater Mexica, cut short by the Civil War. Had Zhu Bao not insisted...

No. I was a magistrate. I had a job to do, a murderer to catch.

"Where is this... Tecolli?" I asked, finally.

"We're holding him," Li Fai said. "You want to talk to him?"

I shook my head. "Not right now." I pointed to the landing high above. "Have you been there?"

He nodded. "There's a bedroom, and a workshop. She was a hologram designer."

Holograms were the latest craze in Xuya. Like all works of art, they were expensive: one of them, with the artist's electronic signature, would be worth more than my annual stipend. "What was her name?"

"Papalotl," Li Fai said.

Papalotl. Butterfly, in Nahuatl. A graceful name given to beautiful Mexica girls. There had been one of them in my school, back in Tenochtitlan, before the Civil War.

The Civil War...

Abruptly, I was twelve again, jammed in the aircar against my brother Cuauhtemoc, hearing the sound of gunfire splitting the window –

No. No. I wasn't a child any more. I'd made my life in Xuya, passed the administrative exams and risen to magistrate, the only Mexica-born to do so in Fenliu.

"M'am?" Li Fai asked, staring at me.

"It's all right," I said. "I'll just have a look around, and then we'll see about Tecolli."

I moved towards the nearest hologram pedestal. A plaque showed its title: *THE JOURNEY*. It was engraved in Nahuatl, in English and in Xuyan, the three languages of our continent. I turned it on, and watched a cone of white light widen from the pedestal to the ceiling; a young Xuyan coalesced at its centre, wearing the grey silk robes of a eunuch.

"We did not think it would go that far," he said, even as his image faded, replaced by thirteen junks sailing over great waves. "To the East, Si-Jian Ma said as we departed China; to the East, until we struck land –"

I turned the hologram off. Every child on the continent knew what was coming next: the first Chinese explorers landing on the West Coast of the Lands of Dawn, the first tentative contacts with the Mexica Empire, culminating in Hernán Cortés' aborted siege of Tenochtitlan, a siege cut short by Chinese gunpowder and cannon.

I moved to the next hologram, *SPRING AMONG THE EMERALD FLOWERS*: a Mexica woman recounting a doomed love story between her and a Xuyan businessman.

The other holograms were much the same: people telling their life's story – or, rather, I suspected, the script Papalotl had written for them.

I headed for the hologram nearest the body. Its plaque read *HOMEWARDS*. When turned on, it displayed the image of a swan,

the flag-emblem Xuya had chosen after winning its independence from the Chinese motherland two centuries ago. The bird glided, serene, on a lake bordered by weeping willows. After a while, a hummingbird, Greater Mexica's national bird, came and hovered by the swan, its beak opening and closing as if it were speaking.

But there was no sound at all.

I turned it off, and on again, to no avail. I felt around in the pedestal, and confirmed my suspicions: the sound chip was missing. Which was not normal. All holograms came with one – an empty one if necessary, but there was always a sound chip.

I'd have to ask the lab people. Perhaps the missing chip was simply upstairs, in Papalotl's workshop.

I moved around the remaining holograms. Four of the pedestals, those furthest away from the centre, had no chips at all, neither visu nor sound. And yet the plaques all bore titles.

The most probable explanation was that Papalotl had changed the works on display; but given the missing sound chip, there could have been another explanation. Had the murderer touched those holograms – and if so, why?

I sighed, cast a quick glance at the room for anything else. Nothing leapt to my eyes, so I had Li Fai bring me Tecolli, Papalotl's lover.

Tecolli stood watching me without fear – or indeed, without respect. He was a young, handsome Mexica man, but didn't quite have the arrogance or assurance I expected.

"You know why I'm here," I said.

Tecolli smiled. "Because the magistrate thinks I will confide in you."

I shook my head. "I'm the magistrate," I said. "The case has been transferred over to me." I took out a small pad and a pen, ready to take notes during the interview.

Tecolli watched me, no doubt seeing for the first time the unobtrusive jade-coloured belt I wore over my robes. "You are not –" he started, and then changed his posture radically, moving in one fluid gesture from a slouch to a salute. "Apologies, Your Excellency. I was not paying attention."

Something in his stance reminded me, sharply, of my lost childhood in Tenochtitlan, Greater Mexica's capital. "You are a Jaguar Knight?"

He smiled like a delighted boy. "Close," he said, switching from Xuyan to Nahuatl. "I'm an Eagle Knight in the Fifth Black Tezcatlipoca Regiment."

The Fifth Regiment – nicknamed 'Black Tez' by the Xuyans – was the one guarding the Mexica embassy. I had not put Tecolli down as a soldier, but I could see now the slight callus under his mouth, where the turquoise lip-plug would usually chafe.

"You weren't born here," Tecolli said. His stance had relaxed. "Xuyan-born can't tell us apart from commoners."

I shook my head, trying to dislodge old, unwelcome memories – my parents' frozen faces after I told them I'd become a magistrate in Fenliu, and that I'd changed my name to a Xuyan one. "I wasn't born in Xuya," I said, in Xuyan. "But that's not what we're here to talk about."

"No," Tecolli said, coming back to Xuyan. There was fear in his face now. "You want to know about her." His eyes flicked to the body, and back to me. For all his rigid stance, he looked as

though he might be sick.

"Yes," I said. "What can you tell me about this?"

"I came early this morning. Papalotl said we would have a sitting."

"A sitting? I saw no hologram pieces with you."

"It was not done yet," Tecolli snapped, far too quickly for it to be the truth. "Anyway, I came and saw the security system was disengaged. I thought she was waiting for me –"

"Had she ever done this before? Disengaged the security system?"

Tecolli shrugged. "Sometimes. She was not very good at protecting herself." His voice shook a little, but it didn't sound like grief. Guilt?

Tecolli went on: "I came into the room, and I saw her. As she is now." He paused, choking on his words. "I – I could not think. I checked to see if there was anything I could do...but she was dead. So I called the militia."

"Yes, I know. Near the Fourth Bi-Hour. A bit early to be about, isn't it?" In this season, on the West Coast, the sun wouldn't even have risen.

"She wanted me to be early," Tecolli said, but did not elaborate.

"I see," I said. "What can you tell me about the swan?"

Tecolli started. "The swan?"

I pointed to the hologram. "It has no sound chip. And several other pieces have no chips at all."

"Oh, the swan," Tecolli said. He was not looking at me – in fact, he was positively sweating guilt. "It is a commission. By the Fenliu Prefect's Office. They wanted something to symbolise the ties between Greater Mexica and Xuya. I suppose she never had time to complete the audio."

"Don't lie to me." I was annoyed he would play me for a fool. "What's the matter with that swan?"

"I do not see what you are talking about," Tecolli said.

"I think you do," I said, but did not press my point. At least, not yet. Tecolli's mere presence at the scene of the crime gave me the right to bring him back to the tribunal's cells to secure his testimony – and, should I judge it necessary, to ply him with drugs or pain to make him confess. Many Xuyan magistrates would have done that. I found the practice not only abhorrent, but needless. I knew I would not get the truth out of Tecolli that way. "Do you have any idea why she's naked?" I asked.

Tecolli said, slowly, "She liked to work that way. At least with me," he amended. "She said it was liberating. I..." He paused, and waited for a reaction. I kept my face perfectly blank.

Tecolli went on, "It turned her on. And we both knew it."

I was surprised at his frankness. "So it isn't surprising." Well, that was one mystery solved – or perhaps not. Tecolli could still be lying to me. "How did you get along with her?"

Tecolli smiled – a smile that came too easily. "As well as lovers do."

"Lovers can kill each other," I said.

Tecolli stared at me, horrified. "Surely you do not think –"

"I'm just trying to determine what your relationship was."

"I loved her," Tecolli snapped. "I would never have harmed her. Are you satisfied?"

I wasn't. He seemed to waver between providing glib answers and avoiding my questions altogether.

"Do you know if she had any enemies?" I asked.

"Papalotl?" Tecolli's voice faltered. He would not look at me. "Some among our people felt she had turned away from the proper customs. She did not have an altar to the gods in her workshop, she seldom prayed or offered blood sacrifices –"

"And they hated her enough to kill?"

"No," Tecolli said. He sounded horrified. "I do not see how anyone could have wanted to –"

"Someone did. Unless you believe it's an accident?" I dangled the question innocently enough, but there was only one possible answer, and he knew it.

"Do not toy with me," Tecolli said. "No one could have fallen over that railing by accident."

"No. Indeed not." I smiled, briefly, watching the fear creep across his face. What could he be hiding from me? If he'd committed the murder, he was a singularly fearful killer – but I had seen those too, those who would weep and profess regrets, but who still had blood on their hands. "Does she have any family?"

"Her parents died in the Civil War," Tecolli said. "I know she came from Greater Mexica twelve years ago with her elder sister, Coaxoch, but I never met her. Papalotl did not talk much about herself."

No. She would not have – not to another Mexica. I knew what one did, when one turned away from Mexica customs, as Papalotl had done, as I had done. One remained silent; one did not speak for fear one would be castigated – or worse, pitied.

"I'll bring her the news," I said. "You'll have to accompany the militiamen to the tribunal, to have your story checked, and some blood samples taken."

"And then?" He was too eager, far too much for an innocent, even an aggrieved one. "I'm free?"

"For the moment – and don't think you can leave Fenliu. I need you at hand, in case I have more questions," I said, darkly. I would catch him soon enough, and tear the truth from him if I had to.

As he turned to leave, he straightened his turtleneck, and I saw a glint of green around his neck. Jade. A necklace of jade, made of small beads – but I knew each of those beads would be worth a month's salary for an ordinary Xuyan worker. "They pay you well, in the army," I said, knowing that they did not.

Startled, Tecolli reached for his neck. "That? It is not what you think. It was an inheritance from a relative."

He said the words quickly, and his eyes flicked back and forth between me and the door.

"I see," I said, sweetly, knowing that he was lying. And that he knew I'd caught him. Good. Let him stew a bit. Perhaps it would make him more co-operative.

After Tecolli had left, I gave orders to Li Fai to trail him, and to report to me through the militia radio channel. Our young lover had looked in a hurry, and I was curious to know why.

Back at the tribunal, I had a brief discussion with Doctor Li: the lab people had examined the body, and they had come up with nothing significant. They confirmed that Papalotl had been thrown over the railing, plummeting from the high-perched mezzanine to her death.

"It's a crime of passion," Doctor Li said, darkly.

"What makes you say that?"

"Whoever did this pushed her over the railing, and she clung

to it as she fell – we analysed the marks on the wood. And then the murderer kept on tearing at her until she let go. From the disorderly pattern of wounds on her hands, it's obvious that the perpetrator was not thinking clearly, nor being very efficient."

Passion. A lover's passion, perhaps? A lover who seemed to have rather too much money for his pay – I wondered where Tecolli had earned it, and how.

The lab people had not found the missing audio chip either, which confirmed to me that the swan was important – but I did not know in what way.

"What about fingerprints?" I asked.

"We didn't find any," Doctor Li said. "Not even hers. The railing was obviously wiped clean by the perpetrator."

Damn. The murderer had been thorough.

After that conversation, I made a brief stop by my office. There I lit a stick of incense over my small altar, pausing for a brief, perfunctory prayer to Guan Yin, Goddess of Compassion. Then I turned on my computer. Like almost every computer in the city of Fenliu, it had been manufactured in Greater Mexica, and the screen lit up with a stylised butterfly, symbol of Quetzalcoatl, the Mexica god of knowledge and computers.

This never failed to send a twinge of guilt through me, usually because it reminded me I should call my parents, something I hadn't had the courage to do since becoming a magistrate. This time, though, the image that I could not banish from my mind was of Papalotl, stark naked, falling in slow motion over the railing.

I shook my head. It was not a time for morbid imaginings. I had work to do.

In my mail-box I found the preliminary reports of the militia, who had questioned the neighbours.

I scanned the reports, briefly. Most of the neighbours had not approved of Papalotl's promiscuous attitude. Apparently Tecolli had only been the last in a series of men she'd brought home.

One thing Tecolli had not seen fit to mention to me was that he had quarrelled violently with Papalotl on the previous evening – shouts loud enough to be heard from the other flats. One neighbour had seen Tecolli leave, and Papalotl slam the door behind him.

So she had still been alive at that time.

I'd ask Tecolli about the quarrel. Later, though. I needed more evidence if I wanted to spring a trap, and so far I had little to go on.

In the meantime, I asked one of the clerks at the tribunal to look up the address of Papalotl's sister. I busied myself with administrative matters while he searched in the directory, and soon had my answer.

Papalotl had had only one sister, and no other living relative. Coaxoch lived on 23 Izcopan Square, just a few streets away from her younger sibling, on the edge of the Mexica District – my next destination.

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The address turned out to be a Mexica restaurant: The Quetzal's Rest. I parked my aircar a few streets away and walked the rest of the way, mingling with the crowd on the sidewalks – elbowing Mexica businessmen in embroidered cotton suits, and women with yellow makeup and black-painted teeth, who wore knee-length skirts and swayed alluringly as they walked.

The restaurant's facade was painted with a life-sized Mexica woman in a skirt and matching blouse, standing before an electric stove. Over the woman crouched Chantico, Goddess of the Hearth, wearing her crown of maguey cactus thorns and her heavy bracelets of carnelian and amber.

The restaurant itself had two parts: a small shack which churned out food to the aircars of busy men, and a larger room for those who had more time.

I headed for the last of those, wondering where I would find Coaxoch. The room was not unlike a Xuyan restaurant: sitting mats around low circular tables, and on the tables an electric brazier which kept the food warm – in this case maize flatbreads, the staple of Mexica food. The air had that familiar smell of fried oil and spices which always hung in my mother's kitchen.

There were many customers, even though it was barely the Sixth Bi-Hour. Most of them were Mexica, but I caught a glimpse of Xuyans – and even of a paler face under red hair, which could only belong to an Irish-American.

I stopped the first waitress I could find, and asked, in Nahuatl, about Coaxoch.

"Our owner? She's upstairs, doing the accounts." The waitress was carrying bowls with various sauces, and it was clear that she had little time to chat with strangers.

"I need to see her," I said.

The waitress looked me up and down, frowning – trying, no doubt, to piece the Mexica face with the Xuyan robes of state. "Not for good news, I'd wager. It's the door on the left."

I found Coaxoch in a small office, entering numbers onto a computer. Next to her, a tall, lugubrious Mexica man with spectacles was checking printed sheets. "Looks like the accounts don't tally, Coaxoch."

"Curses." Coaxoch raised her head. She looked so much like her younger sister that I thought at first they might be twins; but then I saw the small differences: the slightly larger eyes, the fuller lips, and the rounder cheeks.

Coaxoch saw me standing in the doorway, and froze. "What do you want?" she asked.

"I – " Staring at her eyes, I found myself taken aback. "My name is Hue Ma. I'm the magistrate for the Yellow Dragon Falls district. Your sister is dead. I came to inform you, and to ask some questions." I looked at her companion. "Would you mind leaving us alone?"

The man looked at Coaxoch, who had slumped on her desk, her face haggard. "Coaxoch?"

"I'll be all right, Mahuizoh. Can you please go out?"

Mahuizoh threw me a worried glance, and went out, gently closing the door after him.

"So she is dead," Coaxoch said, after a while, staring at her hands. "How?"

"She fell over a railing."

Coaxoch looked up at me, a disturbing shrewdness in her eyes. "Fell? Or was pushed?"

"Was pushed," I admitted, pulling a chair to me, and sitting face-to-face with her.

"And so you have come to find out who pushed her," Coaxoch said.

"Yes. It happened this morning, near the Fourth Bi-Hour. Where were you then?"

Coaxoch shrugged, as if it did not matter that I asked her for an alibi. "Here, sleeping. I have a room on this floor, and the restaurant does not open until the Fifth Bi-Hour. I am afraid there were no witnesses though."

I would check with the staff, but suspected Coaxoch was right and no one could speak for her. I said, carefully, "Do you know of any enemies she might have had?"

Coaxoch looked at her hands again. "I cannot help you."

"She was your sister," I said. "Don't you want to know who killed her?"

"Want to know? Of course," Coaxoch said. "I am not heartless. But I did not know her well enough to know her enemies. Funny, isn't it, how far apart you can move? We came together from Tenochtitlan, each thinking the other's thoughts, and now, twelve years later, I hardly ever saw her."

I thought, uncomfortably, of the last time I'd talked to my parents – of the last time I'd spoken Nahuatl to anyone outside of my job. One, two years ago?

I couldn't. Whenever I visited my parents, I'd see the same thing: the small, dingy flat with the remnants of their lives in Greater Mexico, with photographs of executed friends like so many funeral shrines. I'd smell again the odour of charred flesh in the streets of Tenochtitlan, see my friend Yaotl fall with a bullet in his chest, crying out my name, and I unable to do anything but scream for help that would never come.

Coaxoch was staring at me. I tore myself from my memories and said, "You knew about Papalotl's lovers." I couldn't pin Coaxoch down. One moment she seemed remote, heartless, and the next her voice would crack, and her words come as if with great difficulty.

"She was notorious for them," Coaxoch said. "It was my fault, all of this. I should have seen her more often. I should have asked..."

I said nothing. I had not known either of the two sisters, and my advice would have sounded false even to myself. I let Coaxoch's voice trail off, and asked, "When did you last see her?"

"Six days ago," Coaxoch said. "She had lunch with Mahuizoh and me."

Mahuizoh had looked to be about Coaxoch's age, or a little older. "Mahuizoh being...?"

"A friend of the family," Coaxoch said, her face closed.

Something told me I could ask about Mahuizoh, but would receive no true answer. I let the matter slide for the moment, and asked, "And she did not seem upset then?"

Coaxoch shook her head. She opened the drawer of her desk and withdrew a beautiful slender pipe of tortoiseshell, which she filled with shaking hands. As she closed the drawer, I caught a glimpse of an old-fashioned photograph: a young Mexica wearing the cloak of noblemen. It was half-buried beneath papers.

Coaxoch lit her pipe. She inhaled, deeply; the smell of flowers and tobacco filled the small office. "No, she did not seem upset at the time. She was working on a new piece, a commission by the Prefect's Office. She was very proud of it."

"Did you see the commission?"

"No," Coaxoch said. "I knew it was going to be a swan and a hummingbird, the symbols of Xuya and Greater Mexico. But I did not know what text or what music she would choose."

"Does Mahuizoh know?"

"Mahuizoh?" Coaxoch started. "I do not think he would know that, but you can ask him. He was closer to Papalotl than me."

I'd already intended to interview Mahuizoh; I added that to the list of questions I'd have to ask him. "And so she just seemed excited?"

"Yes. But I could be wrong. I had not seen her in a year, almost." Her voice had gone emotionless again.

"Why?" I asked, although I already knew the answer.

Coaxoch shrugged. "We...drifted apart after settling in Fenu, each of us going our own way, I suppose. Papalotl found her refuge in her holograms and in her lovers; I found mine in my restaurant."

"Refuge from what?" I asked.

Coaxoch looked at me. "You know," she said. "You fled the Civil War as well, did you not?"

I said, startled, "You can't know that."

"It is written on your face. And why else would a Mexica become a Xuyan magistrate?"

"There are other reasons," I said, keeping my face stern.

Coaxoch shrugged. "Perhaps. I will tell you what I remember: brother turning on brother, and the streets black with blood; the warriors of the Eagle Regiments fighting one another; snipers on the roof, felling people in the marketplace; priests of Tezcatlipoca entering every house to search for loyalists –"

Every word she spoke conjured confused, dreadful images in my mind, as if the twelve-year-old who had fled over the border was still within me. "Stop," I whispered. "Stop."

Coaxoch smiled, bitterly. "You remember as well."

"I've put it behind me," I said, behind clenched teeth.

Coaxoch's gaze moved up and down, taking in my Xuyan robes and jade-coloured belt. "So I see." Her voice was deeply ironic. But her eyes, brimming with tears, belied her. She was transferring her grief into aggressiveness. "Was there anything else you wanted to know?"

I could have told her that Papalotl had died naked, waiting for her lover. But I saw no point. Either she knew about her sister's eccentric habits and it would come as no surprise, or she did not know everything and I would wound her needlessly.

"No," I said, at last. "There wasn't anything else."

Coaxoch said, carefully, "When will you release the body? I have to make...funeral arrangements." And her voice broke then. She buried her face in her hands.

I waited until she looked up again. "We'll let it into your keeping as soon as we can."

"I see. As soon as it is presentable," Coaxoch said with a bitter smile.

There was no answer I could give to that. "Thank you for your time," I said instead.

Coaxoch shrugged, but did not speak again. She turned back to the screen, staring at it with eyes that clearly did not see it. I wondered what memories she could be thinking of, but decided not to intrude any further.

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As I exited the room my radio beeped, signalling a private message had been transmitted to my handset. Mahuizoh was waiting outside. "I'd like to have a word with you in a minute," I said, lifting the handset out of my belt.

He nodded. "I'll be with Coaxoch."

In the corridor, I moved to a quiet corner to listen to the message. The frescoes on the walls were of gods: the Protector Huitzilpochtli with his face painted blue and his belt of obsidian knives; Tezcatlipoca, God of War and Fate, standing against a background of burning skyscrapers and stroking the jaguar by his side.

They made me feel uncomfortable, reminding me of what I'd left behind. Clearly Coaxoch had held to the old ways – perhaps clinging too much to them, as she herself had admitted.

The message came from Unit 6 of the militia: after leaving the tribunal, Tecolli had gone to the Black Tez Barracks. The militia, of course, had had to stop there, for the Barracks were Mexica territory. But they had posted a watch on a nearby rooftop, and had seen Tecolli make a long, frantic phone call from the courtyard. He had then gone back to his rooms, and had not emerged.

I called Unit 6, and told them to notify me the moment Tecolli made a move.

Then I went back to Coaxoch's office, to interview Mahuizoh.

When I came in, Mahuizoh was sitting close to Coaxoch, talking in a low voice to her. Behind the spectacles, his eyes shone with an odd kind of fervour. I wondered what he was to Coaxoch; what he had been to Papalotl.

Mahuizoh looked up and saw me. "Your Excellency," he said. His Xuyan was much less accented than Coaxoch's.

"Is there a room where we could have a quiet word?" I asked.

"My office. Next door," Mahuizoh said. Coaxoch was still staring straight ahead, her eyes glassy, her face a blank mask. "Coaxoch –"

She did not answer. One of her hands was playing with the tortoiseshell pipe, twisting and turning it until I feared she would break it.

Mahuizoh's office was much smaller than Coaxoch's, and papered over with huge posters of ball-game players, proudly wearing their knee and elbow-pads, soaring over the court to put the ball through the vertical steel-hoop.

Mahuizoh did not sit; he leaned against the desk, and crossed his arms over his chest. "What do you want to know?" he said.

"You work here?"

"From time to time," Mahuizoh said. "I'm a computer programmer at Paoli Tech."

"You've known Coaxoch long?"

Mahuizoh shrugged. "I met her and Papalotl when they came here, twelve years ago. My *capulli* clan helped them settle into the district. They were so young, back then," he said, blithely unaware that he wasn't much older than Coaxoch. "So...different."

"How so?" I asked.

"Like frightened birds flushed out of the forest," Mahuizoh said.

"The War does that to you," I said, falling back on platitudes. But part of me, the terrified child that had fled Tenochtitlan, knew that those weren't platitudes at all, but the only way to transcribe the unspeakable past into words.

"I suppose," Mahuizoh said. "I was born in Fenliu, so I wouldn't know that."

"They lost both their parents in the War?"

"Their parents were loyal to the old administration – the one

that lost the Civil War," Mahuizoh said. "The priests of Tezcatlipoca found them one night, and killed them before Papalotl's eyes. She never recovered from that." His voice shook. "And now –"

I did not say the words he would have me say, all too aware of his grief. "You knew Papalotl well."

Mahuizoh shrugged again. "No more or no less than Coaxoch." I saw the faint flicker of his eyes. Liar.

"She had lovers," I said, carefully probing at a sore space.

"She was always...more promiscuous than Coaxoch," Mahuizoh said.

"Who has no fiancé?"

"Coaxoch had a fiancé. Izel was a nobleman in the old administration of Tenochtitlan. He was the one who bargained for Papalotl's and Coaxoch's release from jail, after the priests killed their parents. But he's dead now," Mahuizoh said.

"He's the man whose picture is in her drawer?"

Mahuizoh started. "You've seen that? Yes, that's him. She's never got over him. She still makes funeral offerings even though he's beyond all that nonsense. I hoped that with time she would forget, but she never did."

"How did Izel die?"

"A party of rebel warriors started chasing their aircar a few measures away from the border. Izel told Coaxoch to drive on, and then he leapt out with his gun out. He managed to stop the warriors' aircar, but they caught him. And executed him."

"A hero's death," I said.

Mahuizoh smiled without joy. "And a hero's life. Yes. I can certainly see why Coaxoch wouldn't forget him in a hurry." His voice was bitter, and I thought I knew why: he had hoped to gain a place in Coaxoch's heart, but had always found a dead man standing before him.

"Tell me about Papalotl," I said.

"Papalotl...could be difficult," Mahuizoh said. "She was willful, and independent, and she left the clan to focus on her art, abandoning our customs."

"And you disapproved?"

His face twisted. "I didn't see what she saw. I didn't live through a war. I didn't have the right to judge – and neither had the clan."

"So you loved her, in your own way."

Mahuizoh started. "Yes," he said. "You could say that." But there was a deeper meaning to his words, one I could not fathom.

"Do know Tecolli?"

Mahuizoh's face darkened, and for a moment I saw murder in his eyes. "Yes. He was Papalotl's lover."

"You did not like him?"

"I met him once. I know his kind."

"Know?"

He spat the words. "Tecolli is a parasite. He'll take everything you have to give, and return nothing."

"Not even love?" I asked, seemingly innocently.

"Mark my words," Mahuizoh said, looking up at me, and all of a sudden I was not staring at the face of a frail computer programmer, but into the black-streaked one of a warrior. "He'll suck everything out of you, drink your blood and feast on your pain, and when he leaves there'll be nothing left but a dry husk. He didn't love Papalotl; and I never understood what she saw

in him."

And in that last sentence I heard more than hatred for Tecolli.

"You were jealous," I said. "Of both of them."

He recoiled at my words. "No. Never."

"Jealous enough to kill, even."

His face had grown blank, and he said nothing. At last he looked up again, and he had grown smaller, almost penitent. "She didn't understand," he said. "Didn't understand that she was wasting her time. I couldn't make her see."

"Where were you this morning?"

Mahuizoh smiled. "Checking alibis? I have very little to offer you. It was my day off, so I went for a walk near the Blue Crane Pagoda. And then I came here."

"I suppose no one saw you?"

"No one that would recognise me. There were a few passers-by, but I wasn't paying attention to them, and I doubt they were paying attention to me."

"I see," I said, but I could not forget his black rage, could not forget that he might have lost his calm once and for all, finding Papalotl naked in her workshop, waiting for her lover. "Thank you."

"If you don't need me, I'll go back," Mahuizoh said.

I shook my head. "No, I don't need you. I might have further questions."

He looked uncomfortable at that. "I'll do my best to answer them."

I left him, made my way through the crowded restaurant, listening to the hymns blaring out of the loudspeakers, inhaling the smell of maize and *octli* drink. I could not banish Coaxoch's words from my mind: *I will tell you what I remember: brother turning on brother, and the streets black with blood...*

It was a nightmare I had left behind, a long time ago. It could neither touch me nor harm me. I was Xuyan, not Mexica. I was safe, ensconced in Xuya's bosom, worshipping the Taoist Immortals and the Buddha, and trusting the protection of the Imperial Family in Dongjing.

Safe.

But the War, it seemed, never truly went away.

I came back to the tribunal in a thoughtful mood, having found no one to confirm either Mahuizoh or Coaxoch's alibi. Since we were well into the Eighth Bi-Hour, I had a quick, belated lunch at my desk – noodle soup with coriander, and a coconut jelly as a dessert.

I checked my mails. A few reports from the militia were waiting for me. The timestamp dated them earlier than my departure for The Quetzal's Rest, but they had been caught in the network of the bureaucracy and slowed down on their way to the tribunal.

Cursing against weighty administrations, I read them, not expecting much.

How wrong I was.

Unit 7 of the Mexica District Militia had interviewed the left-door neighbour of Papalotl: an old merchant who had insomnia, and who had been awake at the Third Bi-Hour. He had seen Tecolli enter Papalotl's flat a full half-hour before Tecolli actually called the militia.

Damn. There was still a possibility that Tecolli could have found the body earlier, but if so, why hadn't he called the militia at once? Why had he waited so much?

Disposing of evidence, I thought, my heart beating faster and faster.

I should have arrested Tecolli. But instead I had clung to my old ideals, that torture was abhorrent and that a magistrate should find the truth, not wring it out of suspects. I had been weak.

Now...

I had him watched. He had been making phone calls. It was only a matter of time before he had to make some kind of move.

I sighed. Once a mistake had been made, you might as well drain the cup to the dregs. I'd wait.

It was a frustrating process. The afternoon passed and deepened into night. I attempted some Buddhist meditations, but I could not focus on my breath properly, and after a while I gave this up as a lost cause.

When the announcement came, I was so coiled up I knocked down the handset trying to pick it up.

"Your Excellency? This is Unit 6 of the militia. Target is on the move. Repeat: target is on the move."

I grabbed my coat and rushed out, shouting for my aircar.

I met up with the aircar of Unit 6 in a fairly seedy neighbourhood of Fenliu: the Gardens of Felicity, once a middle-class area, had sunk back to crowded tenements and derelict buildings, sometimes abandoned halfway through their construction.

I had a brief chat with Li Fai, who was heading the militia: Tecolli had left the Black Tez Barracks and taken the mag-lev train which crisscrossed Fenliu. One of the militiamen had followed Tecolli on the mag-lev, until he alighted at the Gardens of Felicity station, making his way on foot into a small, almost unremarkable shop on Lao Zi Avenue.

Both our aircars were parked at the corner of Lao Zi Avenue, about fifty paces from the shop – and Tecolli had not emerged from there.

I looked at the three militiamen, checking that they had their service weapons, and drew my own Yi Sen semi-automatic. "We're going in," I said, arming the weapon in one swift movement, and hearing the click as the bullet was released into the chamber.

I stood near the closed door of the shop, feeling the reassuring weight of my gun. At this late hour the street was almost deserted, and any stray passers-by gave us a wide berth, not keen on interfering with Xuyan justice.

Li Fai was standing on tiptoe, trying to look through the window. After a while he came down, and raised three fingers. Three people, then. Or more. Li Fai had not seemed very certain.

Armed? I signed, and he shrugged.

Oh well. There came a time when you had to act.

I raised my hand, and gave the signal.

The first of the militiamen kicked open the door, yelling "Militia!" and rushed inside. I followed, caught between two militiamen, fighting to raise my gun amidst memories of the War, of pressing myself in a doorway as loyalists and rebels shot at each

other on Tenochtitlan's marketplace –

No.

Not now.

Inside, everything was dark, save for a dimly-lit door; I caught a glimpse of several figures running through the frame.

I was about to run through the door in pursuit, but someone – Li Fai – laid a hand on my shoulder to restrain me.

I remembered then that I was a District Magistrate, and that they could not take risks with my life. It was frustrating, but I knew I had not been trained for this. I nodded to tell Li Fai I'd understood, and watched the militiamen rush through the door.

Gunshots echoed through the room. The first man who had entered fell, clutching his shoulder. A few more gunshots – I could not see the militiamen; they'd gone beyond the door.

A deathly silence settled over the place. I moved cautiously around the counter, and stepped through the door.

The light I had seen came from several hologram pedestals, which had their visuals on, but not their audios. On the floor were scattered chips – I almost stepped on one.

In the corner of the wood-panelled room was the body of a small, wizened Xuyan woman I did not know. Beside her was the gun she'd used. The militia's bullet had caught her in the chest and thrown her backwards, against the wall.

Tecolli was crouching next to her, in a position of surrender. Two militia men stood guard over him.

I smiled, grimly. "You're under arrest."

"I've done nothing wrong," Tecolli said, attempting to pull himself upright.

"Sedition will suffice," I said. "Resisting the militia is a serious crime." As I said this, my gaze, roaming the room, caught one of the images on a hologram pedestal, an image that was all too familiar: a Chinese man dressed in the grey silk robes of a eunuch, gradually fading and being replaced by thirteen junks on the ocean.

Papalotl's holograms.

Things that should not have been copied, or sold elsewhere than in Papalotl's workshop.

I remembered the missing chips in Papalotl's pedestals, and suddenly understood where Tecolli's wealth had come from. He had been stealing her chips, copying them and selling the copies on the black market. And Papalotl had found out – no doubt the reason for the quarrel.

But for him it was different: he was an Eagle Knight, and subject to harsher laws than commoners. For a crime such as this he would be executed, his family disgraced. He'd had to silence Papalotl, once and for all.

He'll suck everything out of you.

Mahuizoh could not have known the truth behind his words, back when he had spoken them to me. There was no way he could have known.

Tecolli's eyes met mine, and must have seen the loathing I felt for him. All pretence fled from his face. "I did not kill her," he said. "I swear to you I did not kill her." He looked as though he might weep.

I spat, from between clenched teeth, "Take him away. We'll deal with him at the tribunal."

Yi Mei-Lin, one of the clerks, entered my office as I was typing the last of my preliminary report.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Still protesting his innocence. He says he found her already dead, and only used the extra half-hour to wipe off any proof that he might have tampered with the holograms – removing his fingerprints and wiping the pedestals clean." Yi Mei-Lin had a full cardboard box in her hands, with a piece of paper covering it. "These are his things. I thought you might want a look."

I sighed. My eyes ached from looking at the computer. "Yes. I probably should." I already knew that although we'd found the missing chips in the black-market shop, the swan hologram's audio chip had been nowhere to be found. Tecolli denied taking it. Not that I was inclined to trust him currently.

"I'll bring you some jasmine tea," Yi Mei-Lin said, and slipped out the door.

I rifled through Tecolli's things, absentmindedly. The usual: wallet, keys, copper yuans – not even enough to buy tobacco. A metal lip-plug, tarnished from long contact with the skin. A packet of honey-toasted gourd seeds, still wrapped in plastic.

A wad of papers, folded over and over. I reached for it, unwound it, and stared at the letters. It was part of a script – the swan's script, I realised, my heart beating faster. Tecolli had been the voice of the hummingbird, and Papalotl's script was forcefully underlined and annotated in the margins, in preparation for his role.

The swan – Papalotl's voice – merely recited a series of dates: the doomed charge of the Second Red Tezcatlipoca Regiment during Xuya's Independence War with China; the Tripartite War and the triumph of the Mexica-Xuyan alliance over the United States.

And, finally, the Mexica Civil War, twelve years ago: the Xuyan soldiers dispatched to help restore order; the thousands of Mexica fleeing their home cities and settling across the border.

The swan then fell silent, and the hummingbird appeared. It was there that Tecolli's role started.

Tonatiuh, the Fifth Sun, has just risen, and outside my cell I hear the priests of Huitzilpochtli chanting their hymns as they prepare the altar for my sacrifice.

I know that you are beyond the border now. The Xuyans will welcome you as they have welcomed so many of our people, and you will make a new life there. I regret only that I will not be there to walk with you –

Puzzled, I turned the pages. It was a long, poignant monologue, but it did not feel like the other audio-chips I'd heard in Papalotl's workshop. It felt...

More real, I thought, chilled without knowing why. I scanned the bottom of the second-to-last page.

They will send this letter on to you, for although they are my enemies they are honourable men.

Weep not for me. I die a warrior's death on the altar, and my blood will make Tonatiuh strong. But my love is and always has been yours forever, whether in this world of fading flowers or in the god's heaven.

Izel.

Izel.

Coaxoch's fiancé.

It was the Third Bi-Hour when I arrived at The Quetzal's Rest, and the restaurant was deserted, all the patrons since long gone back to their houses.

A light was still on upstairs, in the office. Gently, I pushed the door open, and saw her standing by the window, her back to me. She wore a robe with embroidered deer, and a shawl of maguey fibres – the traditional garb of women in Greater Mexica.

"I was waiting for you," she said, not turning around.

"Where's Mahuizoh?"

"I sent him away." Coaxoch's voice was utterly emotionless. On the desk stood the faded picture of Izel, and in front of the picture was a small bowl holding some grass – a funeral offering. "He would not have understood."

She turned, slowly, to face me. Two streaks of black makeup ran on either side of her cheeks: the markings put on the dead's faces before they were cremated.

Surprised, I recoiled, but she made no move towards me. Cautiously, I extended Tecolli's crumpled paper to her. "Papalotl stole the original letter from you, didn't she?"

Coaxoch shook her head. "I should have seen her more often, after we moved here," she said. "I should have seen what she was turning into." She laid both hands on the desk, as stately as an Empress. "When it went missing, I didn't think of Papalotl. Mahuizoh thought that maybe Tecolli –"

"Mahuizoh hates Tecolli," I said.

"It doesn't matter," Coaxoch said. "I went to Papalotl, to ask her whether she'd seen it. I didn't think." She took a deep breath to steady herself. Her skin had gone red under the makeup. "When I came in, she opened the door to me – naked, and she didn't even offer to dress herself. She left me downstairs and headed for her workshop, to finish something, she said. I followed her."

Her voice quavered, but she steadied it. "I saw the letter on her table – she'd taken it. And when I asked her about it, she told me about the hologram, told me we were going to be famous when she sold this, and the Prefect's Office would put it where everyone could see it..."

I said nothing. I remained where I was, listening to her voice grow more and more intense, until every word tore at me.

"She was going to...sell my pain. To sell my memories just for a piece of fame. She was going –" Coaxoch drew a deep breath. "I told her to stop. I told her it was not right, but she stood on the landing, shaking her head and smiling at me – as if she just had to ask for everything to be made right."

"She didn't understand. She just didn't understand. She'd changed too much." Coaxoch stared at her hands, and then back at the picture of Izel. "I couldn't make her shut up, you understand? I pushed and beat at her, and she wouldn't stop smiling at me, selling my pain –"

She raised her gaze towards me, and I recognised the look in her eyes: it was the look of someone already dead, and who knows it. "I had to make her stop," she said, her voice lower now, almost spent. "But she never did. Even after she fell she was still smiling." There were tears in her eyes now. "Still laughing at me."

I said at last, finding my words with difficulty, "You know how it goes."

Coaxoch shrugged. "Do you think I care, Hue Ma? It ceased to matter a long time ago." She cast a last, longing glance towards

Izel's picture, and straightened her shoulders. "It's not right either, what I've done. Do what you have to."

She did not bend, then, as the militia came into the room – did not bend as they closed the handcuffs over her wrists and led her away. I knew she would not bend on the day of her execution either, whatever the manner of it.

As we exited the restaurant, I caught a glimpse of Mahuizoh among the few passers-by who had gathered to watch the militia aircar. His gaze met mine, and held it for a second – and there were such depths of grief behind the spectacles that my breath caught and could not be released.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "Justice has to be done." But I did not think he could hear me.

Back at the tribunal, I sat at my desk, staring at my computer's screensaver – one of Quetzalcoatl's butterflies, multiplying until it filled the screen. There was something mindlessly reassuring about it.

I had to deal with Tecolli, had to type a report, had to call Zhu Bao to let him know his trust had not been misplaced and that I had found the culprit. I had to –

I felt hollow, drained of everything. At last I moved, and knelt before my small altar. Slowly, with shaking hands, I lit a stick of incense and placed it upright before the lacquered tablets. Then I sat on my knees, trying to banish the memory of Coaxoch's voice.

I thought of her words to me: *It ceased to matter a long time ago.*

And my own, an eternity ago: *The War does that to you.*

I thought of Papalotl, turning away from Mexica customs to forget her exile and the death of her parents, of what she had made of her life. I saw her letting go of the railing, slowly falling towards the floor; and saw Coaxoch's eyes, those of someone already dead. I thought of my turning away from my inheritance, and thought of Xuya, which had taken me in but not healed me.

Which could never heal me, no matter how far away I ran from my fears.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment, and, before I could change my mind, got up and reached for the phone. My fingers dialled a number I hadn't called for years but still had not forgotten.

The phone rang in the emptiness. I waited, my throat dry.

"Hello? Who is this?"

My stomach felt hollow – but it wasn't fear, it was shame. I said in Nahuatl, every word coming with great difficulty, "Mother? It's me."

I waited for anger, for endless reproaches. But there was nothing of that. Only her voice, on the verge of breaking, speaking the name I'd been given in Tenochtitlan, "Oh, Nenetl, my child. I'm so glad."

And though I hadn't heard that name in years, still it felt right, in a way that nothing else could.

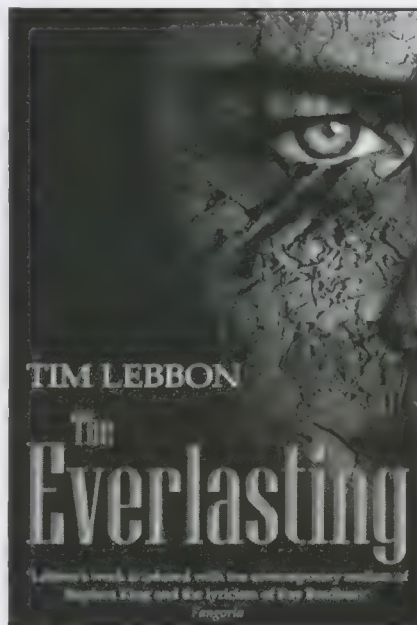
Aliette de Bodard lives in Paris, where she holds a day job in Computer Engineering. She has had short fiction published in *Interzone*, as well as in other venues such as *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show* and *Writers of the Future XXIII*. This story is set in the same alternate-history universe as 'The Lost Xuyan Bride', which was published in *Interzone* 213. Visit aliettedebodard.com for more information about her fiction.

ENTERTAINMENT

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Book Zone Book Reviews



TIM LEBBON's career has been gaining substantial momentum over the last ten years and not without good reason. Starting in the UK Small Presses in 1997, Lebbon went on to gain popularity in the States in 2000 and spent the next seven years building a significant reader base with a number of US publishers. Since 2000, apart from two excellent titles from PS Publishing, Lebbon's work has been sadly neglected in the UK. Until now... **SANDY AUDEN** reviews the latest books and chats with the author

The first Lebbon publication I ever read was the novella 'Faith in the Flesh' back in 1998 and after that I didn't look back. Now, a decade later, I'm reading the latest Lebbon novella **The Reach of Children** and feeling exactly the same kind of enjoyment.

'The Reach of Children' is the story of how Daniel's mum dies when he is ten years old. Struggling to understand what's happening, he can't let her go, and he's not the only one having issues over her death. After the funeral his father starts to drink excessively and then one night Daniel hears him talking to a large wooden box under his parents' bed. Investigating, Daniel whispers to the box...and it answers back.

Following a tradition he's built through all his books, Lebbon's opening sentence is well thought out and actively helps the reader slip deeper into the story. This one not only sets the scene and introduces the main characters but has the added twist of being intentionally misleading too. Not a bad achievement for a mere forty-five words.

The novella demonstrates another Lebbon trait as well: it reads like a peep

show of a single chapter of someone's life, where you're dropping into established situations with a history and future extending away from the story on either side. This is a story of subtle supernatural undertones written in a prose you can glide through. Lebbon picks his words carefully, drawing the required emotions from the reader and instilling the appropriate sense of atmosphere with minimal wordage.

Michael Marshall Smith supplies the Foreword, an appropriate choice given Smith's own story about a boy watching his mother die of cancer in the equally touching *The Servants* (2007). Smith's insight illuminates the heart of Lebbon's novella – our attitude to death – and produces an entertaining discussion using references to defecation! With Lebbon's own thoughts about the story in the Afterword it certainly makes for an emotional and thought provoking package.

The Everlasting touches on a different type of grief: the lingering emotion felt by a 46 year old man, Scott, who lost his grandfather thirty years earlier. When a letter arrives from his dead grandfather,

THE REACH OF CHILDREN

Humdrumming, 89pp, £25 pb

THE EVERLASTING

Allison & Busby, 384pp, £6.99 pb

FALLEN

Allison & Busby, 328pp, £19.99 hb

Scott's life starts unravelling as first he is plagued by ghosts and then his wife is kidnapped by someone seeking the Chord of Souls.

The normalness of the main protagonist in *The Everlasting* makes the surrounding immortals and supernatural realms seem even more strange and exotic while still maintaining a grounded and logical centre. As Scott's life plunges through the surreal events, that normalness becomes increasingly tinged with a deep sense of unease – which is a longstanding trademark of Lebbon's writing, especially in 'Faith in the Flesh' and *The Nature of Balance*. It's a subtle type of fear that undermines and flavours the events with a shifting uncertainty.

As usual, Lebbon doesn't dally with long descriptions once the search for the Chord of Souls is on, and even *The Wide* – the infinite space between reality – is kept concise but wonderfully vivid. The pace is smoothly consistent throughout, surging powerfully towards the climax with impeccable timing.

Under the surface, there are themes

about the effect of immortality on the human psyche, how blood ties families together and how emotional bonds are just as strong as blood ties. There's the occasional convenient plot mechanism to be found, but overall *The Everlasting* is engaging and in places downright thrilling.

After writing horror almost exclusively from 1997, Lebbon started branching out into dark fantasy in 2006 with *Dusk* and *Dawn* set on the world of Noreela, a medieval land where magic was re-emerging after being lost for centuries. This year, **Fallen** takes us four thousand years into Noreela's past when the Voyagers were embarking on great adventures to discover the unknown territories.

A cryptic manuscript has been found near Noreela's Great Divide – a continent-wide cliff soaring miles into the sky – and Nomi sees a chance for her greatest voyage ever. Recruiting fellow Voyager Ramus

and a band of mercenaries, they depart in search of the origin of the parchment and the chance to change Noreela's culture forever.

Lebbon creates an easy sense of history between Nomi and Ramus and he skillfully manoeuvres his characters into conflict, while the journey to The Great Divide cleverly reveals Noreela's fascinating flora and fauna. But unlike many of Lebbon's previous stories, the focus here is a little skewed. The journey itself has too much emphasis on the lands they are travelling through. The world and its (admittedly inventive) denizens get too much attention while the human dynamics are too stretched and thin. It's not until the Voyagers reach The Great Divide that the story starts to really pick up, then it's full speed ahead to a sombre and slightly oblique conclusion. Definitely not for lovers of safe fantasy, this one.

How easy was it to plunder your own experiences and use them in the character of Daniel in 'The Reach of Children' and where do you draw the line and decide something is too personal to share?

Nothing about writing this novella felt easy. The grief Daniel is feeling is very much drawn from my own experiences, and I tried to translate what I felt at the death of my mother when I was 36 into how I might have felt if it had happened when I was ten. So the story is very personal, though Daniel isn't me. I don't think I really drew any lines in the sand when it came to what I used and what I didn't.

What are the main differences between writing a young character like Daniel and older characters like Scott?

Writing a character who is around my age – like Scott – is obviously much easier when it comes to thought processes, and cumulative experience. Daniel is a young boy, and it was a real stretch to remember how a kid of that age thinks, how he talks, how he might view what's going on around him. You can't just write from memory; you have to place yourself there.

The Everlasting and Fallen involve both physical and emotional journeys – how important is it to have both of these aspects in your stories?

It's the emotional journey that forms the heart of any book, so for me that's always vital. A character needs to have changed – or at least accomplished



something emotionally challenging – by the end of a book, as happens to Scott in *The Everlasting*. *Fallen* is a novel about exploration, both spiritual and physical, and so it was essential to me that both types of journey took place here. While the characters are exploring the amazing new landscapes of Noreela, they are also undertaking important journeys in their own minds. As with any journey, there are dangers as well as wonders.



THE NIGHT SESSIONS

Ken MacLeod

Orbit, 324pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by John Howard

With his eleventh novel Ken MacLeod returns to a thoroughly Earthly setting – mainly a near-future Republic of Scotland. The sea level has risen, but climate change seems to be contained and under control, helped by huge soletas in orbit that cause regular solar eclipses. There are orbital elevators in the Atlantic and Pacific, and bases on the Moon and Mars. Robots, ranging in appearance from exactly humanoid to Wellsian tripod, are an everyday sight. People still smoke, drink, and travel to work by public transport. (The shade of Philip K. Dick, especially of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, is ever-present and surely approving.) There are many familiar names, or nearly so. Gazprom and Honeywell are powerful. There is the Hoyle Telescope and the delightfully named Ogle Earth. And as with *The Execution Channel*, one of the tantalising pleasures is to think about how we get from here to there, and just how near-future (or even our future) *The Night Sessions* really is.

In a scene-setting prologue, the fanatical but naïve John Richard Campbell travels from New Zealand to Edinburgh at the invitation of the Free Congregation of West Lothian. A fundamentalist of fundamentalists, Campbell has made himself no small reputation as a preacher

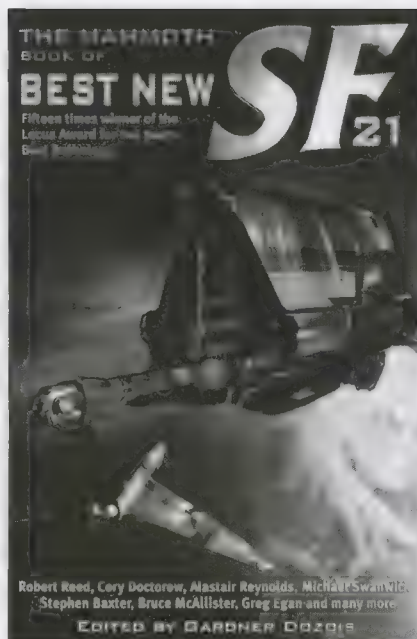
and expounder of his particular version of Christianity – to the humanoid robots who work with him at a creationist theme park. *The Night Sessions* then gets swiftly up to speed with the murder of a Roman Catholic priest a year after Campbell's visit. Not long afterwards, a bishop is murdered. The hunt is on for whoever was responsible – not merely for the two murders, but for potentially upsetting the delicate balance of the world that has resulted from the Faith Wars (or Oil Wars, depending which side you were on).

Politics is usually an integral part of a Ken MacLeod novel, and *The Night Sessions* is no exception. From the beginning author and characters lightly sketch in the political situation. And here MacLeod achieves a particular immediacy by turning the spotlight on religion as well. Through the occasional well-placed infodump we find out that following the end of the Faith Wars the Second Enlightenment dawned, along with the Great Rejection. In the West, Christianity is excluded from all aspects of politics and public life, and takes its place as a purely private activity of a small minority. Freedom to practice religion is allowed, but a formal secularism is in place. The US passes the 31st Amendment to its Constitution: "The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion, nor on any other."

The murders of the clerics implicate a new group, the Congregation of the Third Covenant. Allegedly Christian, anyone who is not with them is against them, and must suffer the consequences. One of their liberally scripturally-referenced publications alludes to an act of sabotage and destruction that would truly change the world for ever. It will take place on the anniversary of the start of the Faith Wars: 11 September.

As the police track down the main suspects in the fundamentalist conspiracy, there is plenty of dark humour and wit, mixed with the deadpan icy logic of fanaticism, and *The Night Sessions* comes into its own as a suspenseful police procedural murder mystery.

Finally the anticipated climax is thrown on its head, with MacLeod using skillfully-placed hints covering his working until he is ready to expose it. Not only human hearts are changed. The world is still changed too – out of any number of human failures *The Night Sessions* comes to an end in a new beginning where all is transformed utterly.



**THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION 25
MAMMOTH BOOK OF BEST NEW SF 21**
St Martin's, 652pp, \$21.95 pb/Robinson, 714pp, £9.99 pb
Gardner Dozois, ed

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

I can't remember which author it was recently suggested on their blog that short-story writing has become akin to making art-house films. Not that many watch the films, not that many read the stories. To push the analogy a little, you're producing showcase work for your peers to appreciate, and for a few aficionados to admire. In which case, to stretch the analogy further, does that mean that anthologies are like film festivals? Some are still a little off-piste, while others have, like Sundance, become respected for their independent flavour. Others like Cannes are part of the scenery, though they may yield the odd surprise. And Gardner Dozois' *The Year's Best Science Fiction* is...a one-man Oscars ceremony, with Dozois, like the Academy Awards judges, moving in mysterious ways when making choices which can sometimes seem puzzling, at other times downright baffling.

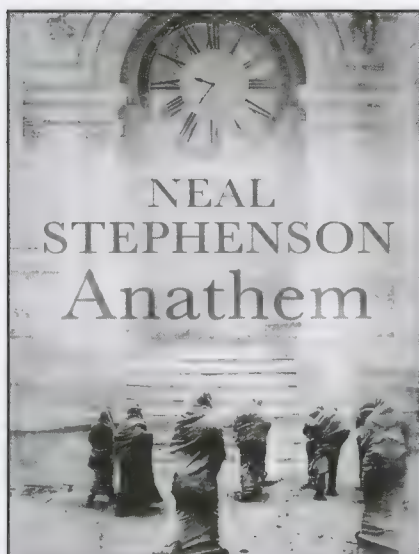
I used to rely heavily on Dozois' annual selection to keep me up with what was going on in short sf; coming back to it, I'm immediately struck by the fact that I have no idea what this 'best' means any more. Dozois' judgement was good enough for me once, but now I'm more sceptical and less inclined to just take it as it comes. How does Dozois make his choices? When he talks about something being better than the

year before, or not as good, what does this mean? Does Dozois have some absolute criteria against which he works, year after year? The reader has no way of knowing.

Every anthology has an underlying narrative, and I must assume that in this instance it's Dozois' personal taste. I know that his tastes are, or were, pretty catholic, and in the past he wasn't afraid to head for the genre's wilder shores. However, I read these stories and the science fiction they present seems mostly safe, conservative, old-fashioned even. There is an unsettling strand of sentimentality in his choices, and way too many 'tomorrow is another day' endings. It could almost be nostalgia. It is interesting too that while Dozois' *Summation* notes many new writers producing short stories so few of this highly active new generation figure in the contents. David Moles gets a look-in with 'Finisterra', as do a couple of other newer faces, including Elizabeth Bear, but for the most part I'm seeing the same names as figured in the first copies of *Year's Best* that I bought, and I'm sure that can't be right.

Which is not to say that this anthology is composed of bad stories – none are less than competent, but a number feel rather tired, the more so when grouped together – more that there are few if any that really stand head and shoulders above the rest. 'Finisterra', for sure, Ted Kosmatka's 'The Prophet of Flores', and Chris Roberson's 'The Sky is Large and the Earth is Small'. Also, and I surprise myself by saying this, I enjoyed Gregory Benford's 'Dark Heaven', less for any science-fictional element it might have, more for his consummate skill in unfolding what is really a police procedural with aliens at a necessarily slow, considered pace. And of course, there is Ted Chiang's 'The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate', which is perhaps the most perfect sf story I've read in the last year, and which gives me more pleasure every time I read it.

Oddly, three out of the five stories I've mentioned in this paragraph are also included in Dozois and Jonathan Strahan's *Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year 2*, which I thought was a much bolder enterprise. One begins to wonder if Dozois' rubric for this anthology, whatever lurks behind the public 'best', has become too narrow for him to admit much of what is now being published under 'science fiction'. But, as with the Oscars ceremony, whatever we feel about the choices, Dozois' *Year's Best* remains a vital part of the annual publishing calendar, even if we're no longer quite sure what it's for.

**ANATHEM****Neal Stephenson**

Atlantic Books, 928pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

Neal Stephenson's project to decipher the underpinnings of the twenty-first century appears to conclude in *Anathem*. The project moves from conjecture and exploration to a call to action. In *Cryptonomicon* and *The Baroque Cycle*, he delved into the networked worlds of data, cyber cash and the ideals of a free Internet through their historical precedents. In *Anathem* he has moved away from the practical aspects of science and has created a meditation on the uses of science in history, which echoes the Cold War although projected into the far future.

The avout live in Concents, walled communities devoted to science and philosophy, with lives ordered by a giant clock. Erasmus, one of the avout, becomes deeply involved with Fra Orolu who is tracking an object in orbit. He continues with his curiosity despite warnings and punishments from the Elders and is sent out of the Concent with some colleagues. His life has not prepared him well for life outside the walls as he and his companions go in search of the object, which has now crashed, discovering the real nature of the Apocalypse and its world.

Stephenson's rapture of the geeks is a world which needs to be worked towards and created but, so far, in contrast to those of Stross or Doctorow, has not been reached. It may be tantalisingly close but it has not yet arrived. Whilst Daniel Waterhouse acted as a way in for the reader



to the working worlds of Newton and Leibniz, teasing out the intricacies of their thoughts though rarely acting on a political whim, in *The Baroque Cycle* he was still bound into the geek world. He explains but never really acts. Waterhouse did the same in *Cryptonomicon* and, while revelling in the unfolding arcane enciphered noise, he deciphered the joke in the signal. *Anathem* sees the monastic world of the Math being torn apart for some of its adherents as they find that they need to make their own way in the world and apply their theoretical findings to practicalities of the chaotic external world.

Stephenson plays with the Multiverse, breaking down universes throughout the journey. The ordered world of the Concent is rendered small by the chaotic worlds outside the walls, sealed off for ten years at a time. These are made yet smaller by the alien visitors who may even be from another universe. He also plays with the idea that we are the toys of these travellers, or that they are on a continuing quest, but he never quite gives a solid answer concerning the implications.

In part, the novel is a meditation on the Millennium Clock, which was a project conceived by the Long Now Foundation at the end of the last century to build a clock that would last for ten thousand years, and how we order our world around time. Instead of the 80s panic we saw concerning the coming change in the date from the Millennium bug and the rise of AI systems, Stephenson presents a cloistered world ordered by the divisions of time from the year to hundreds and even thousands of years. At some point it is easy to conceive of these worlds as Gormenghastian or

influenced by Eco but that would miss the precision underpinning the Concent.

This order conceals, and is concealed by (in an Escher-like fashion), the layers of mystery around the legends about the Concents and their own role in the Apocalyptic history of Arbre. Yet he destroys the Clarkean sense of uplift through contact with the scientific rationale with his aliens who suffer the same sort of divisions as human society. Stephenson moves from a Clarkean sense of waiting for uplift (and answers) to a Space Opera curiosity about the motivations of the travellers and how we perceive them, cynically and rationally from different perspectives.

The world of Arbre is a tangent of Earth with its own thought-out history and language, which is defined in the glossary at the end of the book along with various appendices extending the story. There is a sense in which this is a mythopoeic world, though not one born from linguistics but from the concatenation of ideas. Focussing on a moment in time, Stephenson begins to re-imagine a world where the geeks make useful discoveries and start putting them into practice. He calls on the interlocutors of science to begin explaining and creating practical applications for their ideas, and shows that we should not be afraid of where the journey of curiosity is leading. There is much to think about and read in its density and range of ideas as the book moves from the 1950s into the 2000s. Satisfyingly different from *Cryptonomicon* and *The Baroque Cycle*, *Anathem* brings many of its ideas together in the closing chapter in an attempt to discover the underpinnings of the modern world.

THE GRAVEYARD BOOK

Neil Gaiman

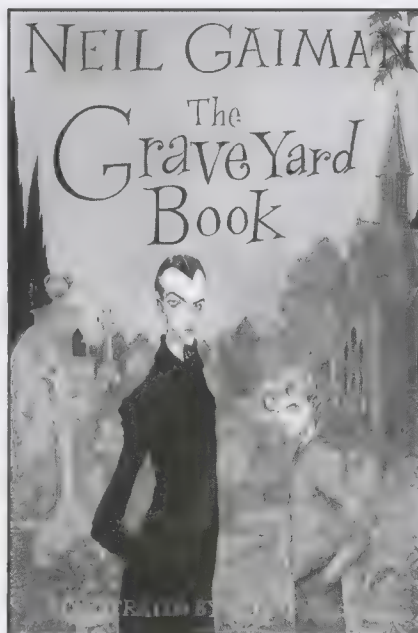
Bloomsbury, 304pp, £12.99 hb

Reviewed by David Mathew

Once we accept the certain boundaries, not least those dictated by the age of the prospective reader, there is nothing about this book not to like. While I came to these pages with no former knowledge of the author's work (other than an abandoned attempt at *Good Omens*, way back when), I was delighted by the opening chapters, and the unfolding of this wonderful children's story.

A children's or teenager's story with edge and bite: *The Graveyard Book* is not backward in coming forward with its tale of a killer on the loose – a slaughter of the innocent is his game, or so we think from page one – and the depiction of a community of the dead, existing in stable equilibrium with what we see as normality. One member of the family attacked by the man Jack – a baby – finds rescue in the arms of the deceased, in the local cemetery.

Echoes with other works are loud. This is not necessarily a bad thing, of course, and one can imagine the intended audience playing a game of spot the reference; but this is not to take from the author any credit in creating a world of the dead that is spritely with life. While the adult reader hears the long-ago reverberations of Clive



Children's Edition

Barker's *Cabal*, not to mention any number of stories involving the making-it-in-this-world of a very young character, the teenaged reader will be unlikely to possess these points of reference, and the story will gleam with its own fresh glow – as well it should.

The prose is swept through by a wind that de-clutters every single unnecessary adjective; it is sparse, yet pretty, with every declension gaining some semblance of



Adult Edition

power by the tautness of the description around it. Quite impressive: the reader is made to see clearly this world of the dead, comparing it in the mind's eye with the real world held out by the book's covers. There is some excellent description of politics – the politics of the dead are no more or less boring or sublime than those of the parties around us – and on the strength of this book, Neil Gaiman is a writer I would like to discover again.

LEXICON URTHUS (SECOND EDITION)

Michael Andre-Druissi

Sirius Fiction, 419pp, \$39.95 hb/\$19.95 pb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Lexicon Urthus is a compendium and dictionary of words and concepts from Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* – *The Shadow of the Torturer*, *The Claw of the Conciliator*, *The Sword of the Lictor*, *The Citadel of the Autarch*, *The Urth of the New Sun*, and ancillary and additional short fiction and essays. It contains definitions, explanations, a note on origin, and often a commentary, on all the unfamiliar words and terms, the characters and places, in the five books, from ABACINATION to ZOETIC.

History: A 'lexicon' is 'the vocabulary used by or known to an individual' (Wiktionary); 'Urthus' is a bogus Latin genitive form derived from 'Urth' – which is actually a Norse word, and the name of the eldest of the Norns (see SKULD and VERTHANDI),

and not a corruption of 'Earth'.

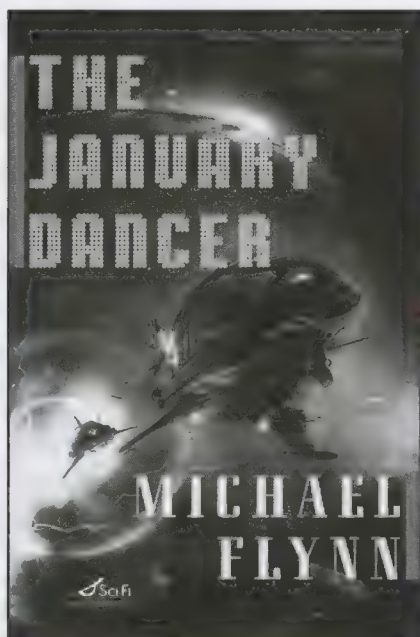
Commentary: The reputation of *The Book of the New Sun* rests in part on the word-games – the obscure and obscuring vocabulary – used by Wolfe in telling his story. Hidden beneath and within these unfamiliar terms are additional elements of the story. They also add to the flavour of Wolfe's world-building. Using invented or unfamiliar terms is not a unique achievement, but Wolfe does not provide a glossary – unlike, say, Frank Herbert in *Dune*. *Lexicon Urthus* in part fills that role – it is subtitled 'A dictionary for the Urth Cycle' – but it is also much more. Words are not simply glossed, but characters names are also explained – their origins and any connection between a historical person bearing that name and the character in the book, and a further commentary on each term. There is also a synopsis of all five books, and several maps of varying usefulness.

Some of the terms glossed are not so

obscure. DHOW: a native vessel used on the Arabian Sea, generally with a single mast, and of 150 to 200 tons burden; a kind of lateen-rigged trading boat (I chap. 12, 114).

Others certainly are. MURENE: the name of the village on the shore of Lake Diuturna (III, chap. 32, 258). *History*: (variant of 'muraena') in early use applied vaguely as the name of a kind of eel mentioned by ancient writers.

Lexicon Urthus's usefulness is specific. As is its appeal. It is for those interested in learning more about, and understanding more of, *The Book of the New Sun*. It is not an analysis of the story – as, say, Robert Borski's *Solar Labyrinth* is – but it is a tool to aid in solving the Urth Cycle's riddles. Its scholarship is impressive – as, one must assume, was Wolfe's when he wrote *The Book of the New Sun*. This second edition corrects many of the errors and omissions discovered in the first edition and subsequently published in Errata & Corrigenda chapbooks.



THE JANUARY DANCER

Michael Flynn

Tor, 350, \$24.95 hb

Reviewed by Peter Loftus

Forced to stop for repairs in an unnamed backwater system, Captain Amos January and his misfit crew set out to investigate the nearest planet for materials with which to construct spare parts. They find more than they bargained for when they stumble upon a cache of alien artefacts of which the 'dancer' is the trophy; an innocuous looking red brick that changes shape

continuously. While nobody can figure out exactly what it is, or what it does, pretty soon every major player in the galaxy wants to get their hands on it.

From the blurb, one could easily believe we are in for a traditional space opera. *The January Dancer* is far from conventional however. The far-future setting provides a mongrel mosaic of cultures, all twisted and deformed like the mysterious artefact of the title. Characters change their names, identities and allegiance as often as their underwear in a future fusion universe as exotic as it is familiar.

The novel contains a strong Gaelic flavour, conveyed in a manner that demonstrates more than a passing knowledge of Irish culture and language, without falling prey to lazy stereotyping or being tempted by the all-too-familiar hackneyed brogue. For readers tired of America/Russia in space, it should come as a breath of fresh air.

It is a mark of Flynn's mastery that he can create such atypical characters and ingenious backgrounds with such authenticity and authority. One gets the feeling that Flynn has worked hard to make the whole experience as distinctive as possible, to avoid what has been said and done before and to create something vibrant, original and engaging – and successfully so.

The January Dancer is an innovative, intellectual and stimulating take on the space opera in which, once again, Flynn demonstrates that he is a writer of the highest calibre.

VAULT OF DEEDS

James Barclay

PS Publishing, 84pp, £10 hb

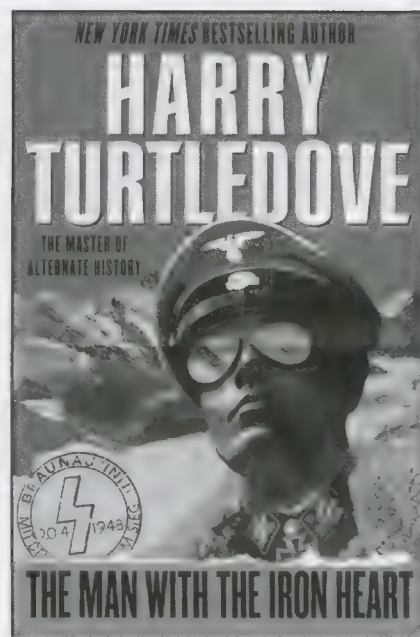
Reviewed by Sandy Auden

In some ways 'Vault of Deeds' is a very typical Barclay story: there's sharp banter, grim determination and wonderful personalities. But this time the author has jettisoned any previously established sense of seriousness and gone on an irreverent romp through a landscape of fantasy clichés with what can only be described as joyous abandon.

Something odd has been happening and veteran scribe Grincheux seems to be the only one who has spotted it. Grincheux's hero Vittore has been savagely smitten on the battlefield by evil-doer Bloodchild and with no more heroic derring-do to record

in the Vault of Deeds, Grincheux has returned to the Hero Academy to await his new charge as they approach graduation. But rather a lot of other heroes have been mortally smitten recently too. So many in fact that the armies of evil are now posing the serious threat of achieving the next Dark Age and overrunning the country. Determined to uncover the dastardly goings-on, Grincheux and his young new hero discover a plot of heinous evil that goes far deeper than either would ever have suspected.

'Vault of Deeds' is a well-structured read with a constantly bubbling humour that pokes fun at every passing cliché. There's plenty of action and more than a couple of twists to navigate too. Which means all in all, this is a feisty little novella that's more than capable of holding its own against the big fat fantasy bricks.



THE MAN WITH THE IRON HEART

Harry Turtledove

Del Rey, 531pp, \$27 hb

Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

Harry Turtledove is the master of alternative history, or as the blurb says 'alternate history', which doesn't quite make sense. This is 'his most controversial epic to date', and there are grounds for controversy, but they don't quite add up either.

The presumption is that Reinhard Heydrich survives the May 1942 assassination attempt which killed him in our world. Instead, he disappears – authorised by Himmler to go underground and fight to reclaim Germany after the inevitable allied victory. All witnesses to the construction of his underground headquarters are to be executed, so the Allies will have no way to learn where the attacks are coming from.

In action, Heydrich systematically invents the entire range of terrorist assaults to which our world has been subjected, especially over the last forty years, but twenty years ahead and directed against the Allied occupation. Bombs are planted, convoys are attacked, politicians are mortared, hostages are taken and executed after filmed 'confessions'; biological warfare, not with anthrax but with wood alcohol, devastates the Russians' New Year celebrations. Car and lorry bombs strike at US bases, one a radiological weapon using a cache of radium which really did disappear at the end of World War 2.

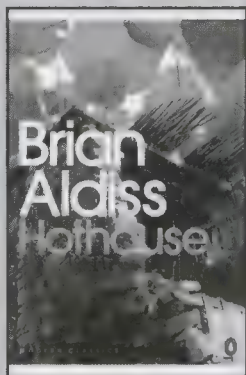
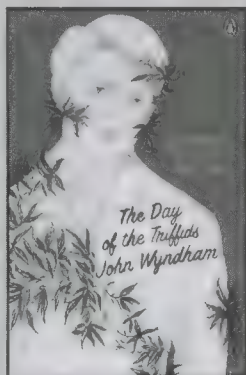
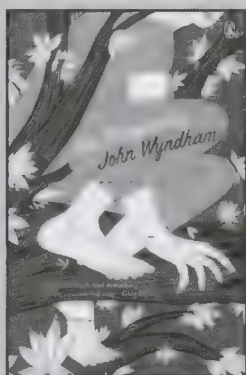
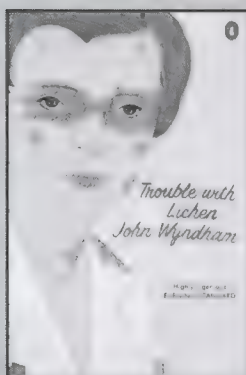
Hijacked aircraft are flown into buildings. A key objective is to prevent what we know as the Nuremberg War Trials, first by killing the judges, then by destroying every site nominated as the venue.

In the USA, the response takes the form of a protest which sweeps the nation, demanding the withdrawal of US troops. In the Soviet Zone, it results in mass arrests, torture and executions. "Can you wonder that we hate you, when you treat us like this?" cries one victim. But just as you can see the controversy start to arise, the contradictions arise with it. The alternative history allows Turtledove to recast the events of Iraq in 1940s Europe, and the parallels with Abu Ghraib and with the deaths of Iraqis under British interrogation are obvious. But by assigning the outrageous behaviour to the Commies, the traditional bad guys of generations of US fiction, Turtledove has drastically

weakened his case. *Our* guys wouldn't behave like that – and if they do, anyone they work over must be guilty, right? Right!

Heydrich's ultimate aim is to develop the atomic bomb, and even less plausibly, a missile capable of reaching the USA. Realistically, he can't – and that means that the capture of German physicists generates nothing except the radiological weapon. They play no other part in the plot and are killed when the hideout is discovered, just to clear up the loose end. It highlights other plot weaknesses. All Heydrich's operations succeed, he gets away every time, and is defeated only because one of the workers who built his hideaway wasn't killed. When the Russians find him, and realise Heydrich is in the American zone, they hand him over, and history converges with ours again. Gripping as this novel is, and it is a page-turner *par excellence*, it would be much more interesting if they hadn't.

FREE JOHN WYNDHAM AND BRIAN ALDISS BOOKS



Penguin Books have recently published Brian Aldiss's **HOT HOUSE** in Penguin Modern Classics and put some new jackets on John Wyndham's **THE CHRYSALIDS**, **THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS**, **THE KRACKEN WAKES**, **THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS** and **TROUBLE WITH LICHEN**. They are offering five copies of *Hot House* and two sets of the Wyndham titles to *Interzone* readers. To be entered into the draws simply email 'Wyndham' and/or 'Aldiss' to competitions@tappress.demon.co.uk, including your name and postal address, by the closing date of 30 November. Winners will be drawn from a hat and announced on the forum (tappress.com/forum). NB: competitions are always posted to the forum and website in advance of publication.

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Prison

A mordant new fantasy
by

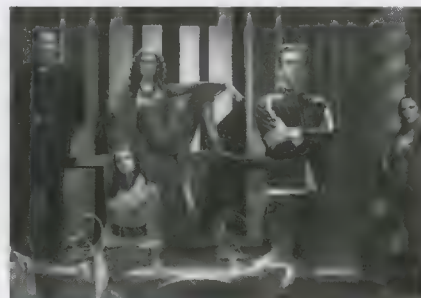
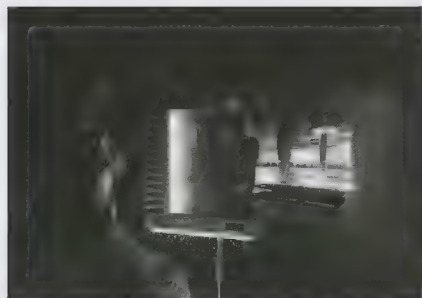
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ISBN 978-1-84753-830-7

Laser Fodder Tony Lee



While the merely average time-slip/death-dreamscape series *Life On Mars*, with an unlucky dip in phildickian allusions, and its adequately entertaining sequel/spin-off *Ashes To Ashes* (owing much to *Dempsey & Makepeace*!) have become inordinately popular with many genre fans, 'proper' sci-fi drama like **Charlie Jade** (3 March) has been rudely overlooked. Whereas *LOM* sports hardboiled *Sweeney* influences (never managing to be as solidly entertaining as the genuine 1970s article, however) whilst aspiring to nostalgic mediocrity, and low-budget kitsch drama *ATA* attempts revival of tiredly camp 1980s fashions but quite brazenly offers nothing more than episodes based around newly-filmed 'music videos' for old songs, the creators of *Charlie Jade* (shot on locations in South Africa), successfully depict eerie 'otherness' with colour-variants of rarely filmed picturesque backdrops for speculative visions of alternative worlds. It's obvious that *Charlie Jade* is influenced by *Blade Runner* (1982), yet only insofar as *Trancers* (1985) and British TV classic *Max Headroom* (1985) were also following Ridley Scott's exemplar of a darkly twisted wholesale futurism to generate their own spins on garage-SF tropes. Created by writer-producers Chris Roland and Robert Wertheimer, *Charlie Jade* stars Jeffrey Pierce (crime drama series *The Nine*, Andrew Niccol's under-appreciated *Simone*) as the titular private investigator from 'Alphaverse' (a green-tinted urban dystopia), stranded near Cape Town in 'Betaverse' (that's uncannily like our own world!), where a couple of desperate pacifist-terrorists from the idyllic 'Gammaverse' sabotage wormhole experiments and cause explosions that kill hundreds, and break down flimsy dimensional barriers so that Charlie – and others – crossover to a parallel Earth. Early episodes flick through disorientations of 'missing-time' or memory failure, in a flurry of what's-wrong-with-this-

picture sulks, examining possibilities of disbelieving Charlie's shell-shocked hallucinations, until a paranoid journalist spouts what's obvious in retrospect. There are telling moments of sinister mega-corporate intrigue, and several thought-provoking scenes of characters succumbing to bewilderment or frustration, verging on descent into outright madness as their identities or sanity are challenged when personal world-views, and any sense of reality, are crushed or turned dizzyingly upside down. Charlie discovers that Alpha girlfriend Jasmine (Marie-Julie Rivest) has a nice doppelganger named Paula in Beta, yet he's haunted by the moral bankruptcy of his dark past. Flamboyant corporate heir turned freaky schizo playboy, 01 Boxer (Michael Filipowich), is able to pass between dimensions – and has a different persona in each – just by dousing himself in water, but troubled Charlie is now stuck in Beta with no chance to escape or hope of rescue. A cover-up by wicked corporation Vexcor sidelines any investigations of the potential inter-dimensional cataclysm, so Charlie launches reluctantly into counter-espionage action, between hardboiled noir-ish episodes of missing-person searches. Along the murky way to his redemption as quantum messiah, there's justice for Reena (Patricia McKenzie), a distressed refugee from Gamma, who's brutalised and re-programmed for assassination but turns against her reptilian masters, and for proverbial 'honest cops' from different 'verses, Sew Sew Tukarrs (a Gaff-like David Dennis, combing another *Blade Runner* thread in position) and Blues Paddock (lovely flame-haired Rolanda Marais), both portrayed by newcomers who create fine supporting characters that we really care about. From under the radar, to in the spotlight, this is definitely one sci-fi thriller series to savour, and teasingly vague 'grey men' clues provide a striking twist-in-the-tale making surreal episode *Ouroboros* a great finale. Another season, please!

Charlie Jade deserves a limited degree of criticism for delivery of style over content, and yet...unlike the insipidly blithe acceptance of strangeness ("You can't just bring alien slave girls back to Earth willy-nilly!") by characters in the TV remake of **Flash Gordon** (28 July), there is authentic genre substance to be found beneath its glossy production standards, whereas this series only works as a throwaway farce that won't tax your brain, but will try your patience. The standard chills and middling thrills are camp, but staged in a manner that's cynical not endearing. *Flash Gordon* differs from *Charlie Jade* in its slavish and decidedly fannish devotion to conventions of media-SF and general heroic problem-solving pulp-fiction simplicity, not to the radical affect of literary SF – with its complexity, ambiguity and commitment to irreversible changes. Whenever it aims for



Baffled by the enduring appeal or (ultimate chick-lit?) popularity of Jane Austen's British novels and various iconic screen adaptations? Well, although ITV's two-part serial **Lost In Austen** (29 September) is another 'strange trip' into dreamlands of fantasy-romance and comedy-drama that fails to adequately explain the longevity of

a multi-faceted tone, as with Ming's semi-lucid rages or Flash's predictably on-going loss of happy-go-lucky innocence, *Flash Gordon* sags to bathos.

Steven 'Flash' Gordon (Eric Johnson, *Smallville*) struggles to reconcile his feelings for sweetheart Dale Arden (Gina Holden, *Blood Ties*, *Butterfly Effect 2*) with his obvious attraction to flighty and flirty Aura (Anna Van Hooft, supplying couture candy), while 'benevolent father' Ming (John Ralston) – miseries leavened/days brightened only by public executions – and a non-ranting yet Davros-like bad scientist Rankol (Jonathan Walker) hardly seem a match for overtly geeky Dr Zarkov (Jody Racicot, *Greenmail*) and Mongo bounty hunter Baylin (Karen Cliché, *Mutant X*), never mind the primary opponents of this interplanetary war of nerves that develops out of borrowings from 1980's *Flash Gordon* movie. Adding *Sliders*' gizmos, forgettable *Smallville* menaces and sub-standard *X-Files* situations to the steadily escalating conflict, this entertains, in a colourfully animated-wallpaper mode. But, when the sidekicks are better written and portrayed characters than chiefs of villainy (Ming, especially, is unevenly played, with bemusing efforts to fix the vicious dictator as a sympathetic character!), serious drama is non-existent, and a fallback

level of in-joke humour cannot sustain mature viewers' continued interest for long. Showcasing unsophisticated cash 'n' carry sci-fi sensibilities, with a mid-season slump adding to premeditated insults, and clear theft of its greatest spectacle (lake water is drained via wormhole rift) from *Charlie Jade* – produced two years earlier – this bland *Flash* fails to "save every one of us" and needs flushing from memory. Its voodoo monks, neo-pagan goddess, wingless hawk-men, carnival mysticism, panto vampire chick, re-writable prophecies, storybook 'death lottery', and reliance on medieval rites, tribal wars and rural community barter trade for 'alien' traits saves the writers from having to construct any convincingly futuristic societies or groups, while the sheer mundanity of Dale's nosy-cop fiancée joining the heroes' team, and the programme's deplorable handling ("I've got a bad feeling about this!") of inappropriate third-world ethnic cleansing and slavery clichés only serves to illustrate just how untogether this frightfully disappointing show is. Building up to a Mongo *coup d'état* by merciless Ming's rejected offspring, and the inevitable reunion of Flash and his scientific-genius dad, *Flash Gordon* lapses unthinkingly into dismal soap opera about fathers and sons.

interests in Austen, it's a TV show that's worth seeing for its multitude of deliciously twisted ironies, and the genre sequence of 'Mr Darcy' (Elliot Cowan, in his first lead role), with brow furrowed, coattails flapping, on busy streets of 21st century London, where he's future-shocked into incoherence...making rashly impolitic observations ("surfeit of negroes") on the bus to Hammersmith. Amanda Price (Jemima Rooper, memorable as lesbian ghost Thelma in *Hex*) is a devoted fan of *Pride And Prejudice*, so perhaps it's no surprise when she magically swaps places with Georgian England's fictional heroine Elizabeth Bennet. Spellbound by her postmodern situation, Amanda struggles with inconvenient domestic jolts (no toothbrush, but there's birch twigs and chalk!), and her uncertain status as uninvited guest in the hilariously fractious Bennet household. Emerging quietly from her 'twentysomething' cocoon to the cheerful farce of prickly 'metropolitan' sophisticates and grasping country social

charmers, Amanda is unready for the 'whore-mongering' and matchmaking at Netherfield Ball, but she's an indomitably meddling protagonist, offering voiceover narration whilst navigating errors of mannered courtship/marriage and royally messing up the anticipated *PAP* storyline. Lindsay Duncan (*Reflecting Skin*, *Mansfield Park*, Jed Mercurio's updated *Frankenstein*) is formidable as quite horrid Lady Catherine, Rooper's former *Hex* co-star Christina Cole is very good as devious antagonist Caroline Bingley, Alex Kingston blusters or blubs as Mrs Bennet, hapless merchant for a clutch of available daughters, and Hugh Bonneville (*Bonekickers*) holds the Bennet family together without leaving his backroom den. Austen purists might pour scorn upon this "What's a 'sandwich'?" rewrite of treasured 'historical documents'. However, whether clued-up on the details of Austen's book or not, fans of witty alternate-world fantasies should find plenty of post-feminist tearjerker amusements here.

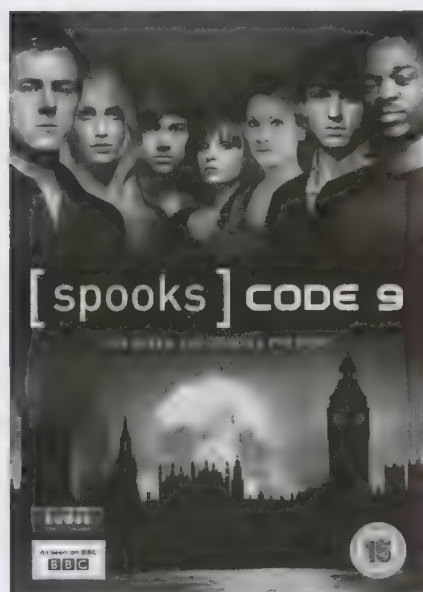


I'm not a *Discworld* fan, and I hate David Jason, so Terry Pratchett's **The Colour Of Magic** (3 November) was something of a double ordeal for me to watch, especially as there's three hours of this dreary TV comedy-fantasy. This is not an objective review... From an unbearably smug intro by Pratchett, to its twee aged binge of mutant turtles finale, this naff 'buddy movie' journeys from its Dickensian rapture in Ankh-Morpork to an exploratory mission over the world's edge, where stylised Verne meets absurdist Lovecraft. Spineless fidgety whiner Rincewind (David Jason, *Only Fools And Horses*) is hired as local guide for *Discworld*'s first ever tourist, Twoflower (Sean Astin, *LOTR* trilogy). They plan for safe adventures but 'untoward' things keep happening to them. Vadim (*Beyond Bedlam*) Jean's prequel to Christmassy indulgence *Hogfather* (2006) has a cast of notable actors, including Tim Curry (*Legend*, *Clue*), Jeremy Irons (*Time Machine* remake), James Cosmo (*Troy*, *Last Legion*), Christopher Lee as the voice of Death, and Brian Cox is the narrator. As with *Hogfather*, I suffered 20 minutes of this arch nonsense before succumbing to fast-forward fever, and found I have developed a numbingly phobic, debilitatingly allergic reaction to gurning wizards in floppy hats. I really loved the otherness of *Neverwhere*, Terry Gilliam's *Baron Munchausen* is a far superior quest adventure, *Golden Compass* had its unexpected merits, and even *Erik The Viking* raises a few laughs, but I just cringe while thinking about *Discworld* stuff. Damn its every banana-skin pratfall, slapstick hazard swordfight, caricatured

threat, despairingly inconsequential 'wonder', antithesis of drama, garishly plastic CGI, and routine papering-over-the-cracks with lifeless banter, or 'meanwhile' cutaway editing. A pox on its rancid cheesy clichés, lame sightseeing gags, telegraphed Tolkien twists, desperately overworked bits of aimless busyness, solipsistic remarks and throwaway pantomime blathering. Curse the shamelessly theatrical mugging, vacuous repetition of gaudy sideshow frolics and impertinent borrowings from Arthurian folklore (now reducing symbolic Excalibur from grandly mythic to cartoon mundane). Sod its cod-philosophical asides, scarcity of genuine imagination, narrowness of vision and every curmudgeonly ad-hoc conjuring trick of shambling incongruity and infantile attitude. Who really cares what sex the space turtle is? Traditional fantasy on the screen needs inspired creativity, with serious consideration for weighty issues, not blandly parodic travelogue jaunts with imbecilic non-heroes.

Having adapted Robert Heinlein's 1959 novel *Starship Troopers* for director Paul Verhoeven's 1997 film, and then written the screenplay for Phil Tippett's follow-up *Starship Troopers 2: Hero Of The Federation* (2004), Edward Neumeier makes his directorial debut with sequel, **Starship Troopers 3: Marauder** (29 September). "Would you like to know more?" Evoking both *War Of The Worlds* and *Magnificent Seven* in its SF-horror plot, this Federal Network reportage offers a winning mix of smutty satire (checkout *Star Trek: Enterprise*'s Jolene Blalock, as Ripley-wannabe Captain Lola Beck) and political commentary – putting fundamentalism under fire, targeting the 'war on terror', and hurling ridicule at the weapons of mass destruction furor with its final option Q-bomb. The first movie's star, Casper Van Dien, returns as Johnny Rico, now a ranking colonel placed awkwardly in opposition to apparently traitorous psychic Omar (Stephen Hogan) and seemingly corrupt admiral (Amanda Donohoe). But

the real secret enemy is the oversized 'brain bug' (captured at the end of Verhoeven's film), which spies for hive-worlds of the alien-arachnid 'archies', and links direct to monstrous Behemecoytal. Trapped on a desert planet in the war zone, Rico and Lola muster what defences and protection they can against lurking menace and swarms of insect attacks, before the final showdown brings mechanised armour power-suits into play. Crude humour, unsubtle performances and disjointed pacing certainly don't help matters, but this is a black comedy/sci-fi actioner with moments of savage wit and a definite crowd-pleasing appeal.



Popular BBC spy drama *Spooks* now has its sixth season on DVD. A sci-fi orientated spin-off **Spooks: Code 9** (8 September), also created by David Wolstencroft, posits near-doomsday for London, nuked by terrorists in 2013, forcibly relocating Britain's capital northwards and resulting in the complete reorganisation of security services, that gives West Yorkshire a field office of MI5 staffed by predominantly young agents from varied backgrounds, including medical, academia, police, and even an ex-crook. When their boss

is killed, maths whiz kid Charlie (Liam Boyle) becomes team-leader, reporting to chief Yates (Lorraine Burroughs), and promptly finds he's confronting a conspiracy to explode another A-bomb that might kill the prime minister, just a year after the first attack. Playing like *Rockcliffe's Babies* (1987) meets *Bugs* (1995–8), but with strong language and stronger characters, this balances cool frontline action with crude politics, in a brief six-episode stint which starts and ends well – but sags in the middle. There's strained poignancy, as Rachel (blonde Ruta Gedmintas) is attracted to nerdy Charlie, while action guy Rob (Andrew Knott) loses his one chance with her. Streetwise Jez (Heshima Thompson) fights demons of his petty-criminal past, while feisty redhead Kylie (Georgia Moffett) revels in clubbing and shootouts. Except for a backdrop of cramped detention centres, teeming refugee camps and slummy housing compounds where anarchy rules, SF elements are relatively minor. There's minimum gadgetry, apart from a sonic weapon and some computer hacking, and real locations – from city streets to Yorkshire dales – are used to lend veracity to various chases and counter-espionage operations. Northern soap and kitchen-sink backstory, with one too many cups of tea, weakens the show's potential as a fast-moving borderline sci-fi drama.

It's possible that fans of *Dungeons & Dragons* might like Dwayne Carey-Hill's feature cartoon **Futurama: Bender's Game** (3 November), but if so they're probably even easier to please than me. Scattershot character humour laced with genre parody that targets *Star Wars* (light-sabre duel silliness) and Tolkien ('ents' are good firewood) and everything in between, but I found only a half-dozen good jokes in its 85 minutes runtime.

After loading his imagination program, loutish mecha man Bender becomes delusional, believing he's a quest knight until his nuthouse 'robotomy' opens the gate to a fantasy realm where he actually is Titanus Anglesmith. *Starship* pilot Leela, now a centaur, teams up with a golem-like Frydo and otherworldly incarnations of tetchy Prof Farnsworth, slurping Dr Zoidberg and decorous Amy (here she's Gynacaladriel), to save Bender from his *D&D* induced madness, and rescue alien pet Nibbler, whose entire race have been enslaved by... (well, see this yourself), for purposes of... (ditto). It's about dark matter and magic dice, sub-cultural farce, the usual sexual innuendo, and might be worth renting if you liked the TV series, but is certainly not one to buy.

We have 3 copies of FUTURAMA: BENDER'S GAME to give away.
Who created the TV series Futurama?



Chris Carter's long-touted sequel **The X-Files: I Want To Believe** (24 November) had a dull trailer. No surprise, then, that it's not a good film. Ex-FBI agents Mulder & Scully are back, guided by a disreputable psychic in their search for a serial killer. Dr Scully's subplot quest for a rare-disease cure isn't brain surgery... No, wait. Yes it is! Billy Connolly's defrocked priest and castrated paedophile Crissman exclaims: "All I ever wanted was to serve God!" But sceptic and lapsed catholic Scully fails to ask the obvious question: "Why?" Mulder's personal delight at being called upon to advise a federal taskforce balances years of professional anguish while relegated to basement offices, shunned by his colleagues. FBI agent Dakota (plucky Amanda Peet, *Identity*, *Martian Child*, *High Crimes*), acts impressed by Mulder's savvy – but from the start, it's abundantly clear that she's doomed. This slow-burning chiller has no excitement and, for keen fans of the TV series, nothing to commend it except for the presence of genre favourites David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson. A rogue scientist conducting Frankensteinian transplants is hardly breaking new ground for SF-horror. Offering a couple of character studies, of ageing and faded (but not forgotten!) heroes struggling with private obsessions and unavoidable tragedies, in place of authentically dramatic storytelling about hope, there's plenty here to enjoy in a time-wasting fashion but it's sadly unexceptional fare at best.

We have 3 copies of THE X-FILES: I WANT TO BELIEVE to give away.
Who co-wrote this film with Chris Carter?

Chief among the latest batch of re-issues is **The Princess Bride** (3 November). It is good to see this again, but the last 20 years have not been kind to its once-charming appeal as a very postmodern epitome of romantic swashbuckling comedy-adventure. What had seemed astonishingly fresh and wholly innovative back in 1987 now looks simply quaint and just mildly diverting. Half parody of genre conventions, half direct storybook composition that reinforces all expected fantasy traditions, but with a third part of yearning for nostalgic wonder at what fairy tale innocence has been lost in the

postmodern age, Rob Reiner's film was penned by William Goldman (from his book), but viewed today, is unfortunately a letdown. Stylish CGI of *Stardust* easily trumps it with special visuals, and the dashing heroism and expansive plotting of *LOTR* trilogy shines much brighter, its light reaching back in time over decades to reveal the flaws in this now-ordinary film that were not readily apparent when it was made. Sad how time fades the appeal of everything. In our fast-moving century, less time is required for tastes to radically change, and once-fashionable movies like this go out of favour.

The competitions are open to current subscribers only. You may enter as many as you like. Simply email your answers to competitions@ttapress.demon.co.uk, including your postal address, by the closing date of 30 November. Winners will be drawn from a hat and announced on the forum (ttapress.com/forum). Competitions are also listed on the website and forum in advance of magazine publication, which is especially useful for overseas subscribers! NB: the DVDs are all region 2.

We have many more competitions in our sister magazine *Black Static*.

(SUPER) HEROES ROUND-UP

If you found comedy scenes in *Spider-Man 3* to be poorly judged nonsense, then it's likely that Craig Mazin's rough parody **Superhero Movie** (13 October) will prove unforgivably crude and unwatchable. Kinka Usher's *Mystery Men* (1999), and even *The Specials* (2000) – curiously, also directed by Mazin – remain markedly superior. Not shy about insulting celebrities like Stephen Hawking and Tom Cruise, it shuffles mini roles for characters from *Fantastic Four* and *X-Men*, and labours fart jokes to a point beyond tolerance. *Superhero Movie*'s absolutely unfunny lameness makes the throwaway jokey scenes in **Iron Man** (27 October) seem like Shakespearean humour by comparison. Perfectly cast as Tony Stark, the playboy-industrialist who becomes a flying cyber-warrior, Robert Downey Jr makes the most out of a difficult, seemingly underwritten role. For all its clumsy asides, and a climactic battle so obviously copied from *RoboCop 2* (1990), Jon Favreau delivers a better picture than Louis Leterrier's hurriedly re-cast **The Incredible Hulk** (13 October), which appears to have been judged a successful re-start for Marvel's ambitious genre franchise. While this has a few

exciting moments of pure comicbook élan, I still think it was a dreadful mistake to 'lighten up' this kind of fantasy. Ang Lee's unfairly maligned *Hulk* (2003) remains the current state-of-the-art highpoint in this decade's cycle of super-adventures, while the frivolous tone and weaker theme of this particular sequel/remake shift its appeal much closer to slick 'fun' qualities of *Fantastic Four*'s sequel, moving away from the darker edginess of *X-Men 2*. Hopefully, widespread acclaim justifiably heaped upon Christopher Nolan's **The Dark Knight** (8 December) will change Marvel's attitude back to choosing art-house directors for their blockbusters, and there may be more gritty thrillers for costumed do-gooders instead of lightweight fodder. The science-hero/treasure hunter of Spielberg's **Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull** (11 November) may lack special powers or a secret identity, but his luck against various baddies is legendary enough to win Indy a place on this listing. Hardly a comeback triumph, this flick is reasonably entertaining, and quite pacy for such a sprawling production, but lacks anything in the way of imagination or sheer craftsmanship, and has none of the witty charm that made the trilogy so memorable.

Mutant Popcorn Nick Lowe



Who says sf doesn't predict the present? As a longtime and lonely apologist for the desperately underappreciated Paul W.S. Anderson, I can't temperately articulate how chuffed I was to see **Death Race** make a killer score right out of the gate by opening with the words "2012: The US economy collapses." Anderson's 2008 body-job on the Paul Bartel-Roger Corman exploitation classic throttles back on the breezy black humour, ditching the original's pedestrian-massacre scoring system and flag-burning hippie anarchism for a more deadpan, but still more inventive, mode of political satire that models the entire US financial system as a violent videogame. In Anderson's scenario, the massively overloaded penal system has to fall back on private fundraising, which Joan Allen's hissable warden manages by staging *Death Race* as a subscriber-funded media spectacle staged in an offshore prison facility. (The navigators are now drawn from the babe prison upstate, though they don't get to flash boobs in this version.) Because it's subscription entertainment broadcast live in real time, income is directly controllable by Allen gamerunner, who effectively manipulates the adrenalin curve by injecting or adjusting game elements in the course of play.

What makes Anderson such a uniquely fascinating filmmaker is his extraordinarily deep understanding of the dynamics of videogaming, which leaves everyone else in the sector completely standing. Anderson knows that a 2008 *Death Race* can't afford not to take account of the close but complex narrative and cultural relationship

between film and first-person gaming; and he's made this the *raison d'être* of his film in ways that not only bring out his own key strengths as storyteller and spectacle-maker alike, but make the relationship between gameplay and narrative central to his political and satiric vision. *Death Race 2000* had its US release in April 1975, a few weeks ahead of its rather more straightfaced competitor *Rollerball*; and these two films were seminal influences on the decade's most important event in British SF, the launch of *2000 AD* in February 1977, whose gleeful splatter ethos borrowed freely from the sf cinema of that pivotal moment on the eve of *Star Wars* when it wasn't yet apparent that the *Jaws* phenomenon was endlessly replicable or that the future of science fiction film lay not in exploitation cinema but in spectacle blockbusters. Even more significantly, the original *Death Race*'s title and scenario were appropriated, without permission, for a seminal 1976 arcade game which replicated both the race element and the pedestrian-slaughtering points system in a first-person videogame experience, and became the ultimate ancestor of *Carmageddon* and *Grand Theft Auto*.

Anderson is alert to all this historical resonance and baggage, but he's also aware that the magical year of 2000 has other landmarks of its own. For the film on which *Death Race*'s actual plot is based is not, in fact, *Death Race 2000* but *Gladiator* – an association explicitly weapon-activated in the opening exposition, with its heavy references to ancient Rome, gladiators, and the Colosseum. Picking up on a casual hint in the 1975 version, Jason Statham's 2008 *Frankenstein* is given a backstory as a talented innocent groomed for *Death Race* by the system itself, framed and banged up for the murder of his wife which was actually engineered by the warden. As in 2000, his covert mission is not to win the race but to take down the system itself; but how can the occupants of an enclosed game universe bring down the game engine and designer that are their true nemeses? The solution, of course, involves a conspiracy of cooperation among the ostensible competitors, culminating in the distinctly post-millennial narrative payoff of a prison break. It's brilliantly constructed, with astonishing in-camera car stunts and a refreshingly British, 2000AD-inspired sensibility to the violence.



A different kind of seventies throwback, the uniformly dismal **Star Wars: The Clone Wars** is distinguished mainly for managing to make *The Ewok Adventure* look like *The Godfather Part II*. The *Clone Wars* film is essentially a feature promo for the upcoming animated television series, which retools the Star Wars universe for a younger daytime audience. The opening exposition-crawl is now voiceovered for the benefit of younglings who don't yet have the reading chops; a spunky, attitudinal girl padawan is added to the cast for demographic appeal; a team of Abbott & Costello droids supply easy comic relief; and so on. Character animation is stylised but crude, with stiffly Supermarionated-looking levels of movement and expression. There's a sinking moment early on when you realise that you're not actually going to get the saga of the Clone Wars at all, but a throwaway television episode set against them as backdrop, with neither significance nor consequences for the larger arc. This resistance to anything of continuity-threatening moment ever actually happening is the curse of television narrative, but it's particularly uncomfortable to see Anakin Skywalker, of all screen icons, caught in a state of moral suspended animation as his Vaderisation

Mamoru Hosoda's **The Girl Who Leapt Through Time** is the fifth screen version, but the first in anime, of Japanese sf veteran Yasutaka Tsutsui's 1967 novel *Time + object-marker Run Girl*, a classic in its homeland but still untranslated in the west. The director, Mamoru Hosoda, is the same age as the book, and until now known outside Japan principally as the original director Miyazaki sacked from *Howl's Moving Castle*. Its storyline mixes *Groundhog Day* with *The Butterfly Effect*, as tomboy heroine Makoto stumbles on a power to rewind time and amend her consequential mistakes, only to discover that she's doing greater damage to the lives of those around her which she must somehow undo before her time is up. Made simultaneously with the anime of Tsutsui's later *Paprika*, it's taken a couple

in Episodes II–III is put on hold for an indefinitely extensible series of japes and escapades.

What actual kids will make of it is hard to say, as if anything the plot rationale is harder to follow than in the live-action Episodes. Nothing else feels like a *Star Wars* script, with the too-fast explanations about what's going to happen and why it makes sense, so that even adult viewers are reduced to watching like a child, with no real narrative comprehension. Here, sadly, *Clone Wars* faithfully retains the shape and tone of a *Star Wars* film, but none of the disarming goofy charm and old-school sense of wonder. Indeed, it's fascinating to see what a *Star Wars* film looks like without any of the things that allow the *Episodes* to get away with it: the envelope-pushing live-action spectacle, the good actors trying to wrap themselves around the unspeakable. Here, at least, *Clone Wars* can hold its own, with lines like "I am equally delighted to remake your acquaintance" and "You will regret this, Zero." – "No, I think I will become rich with this, ha ha ha ha ha." Celebrity voice talent is often overvalued in animation, but *The Clone Wars* is a grim reminder of how much worse is trying to do it on the cheap. None of the vocal impersonations sounds remotely like the original actor, even the three who actually are (Samuel Jackson, Christopher Lee, and Anthony Daniels), though there's some mild comic value to be had from hearing an obviously American voice struggle to impersonate Ewen McGregor's impersonation of Alec Guinness.

of years to get a UK cinema release, but is hugely welcome on the big screen. Girls are the constituency that Hollywood has most consistently and shamefully failed, and it's a bizarre irony that for characters and narratives that come closer to representing their dreams they've turned in droves to the cultural output of Japan, not otherwise conspicuous as a global champion of women's empowerment. But there's an argument that it's precisely the contradictions in Japanese attitudes to girls in education that have made the anime heroine one of modern Asian pop culture's most vital gifts to the world. Certainly it's hard to imagine Hosoda's beguiling version coming off in live action. It's not just that the art and characters are powerfully stylised, with a deliberate aesthetic of flat-coloured 2D foreground



Babylon AD is a rare, and in the event unhappy, adaptation of a Francophone sf novel, Maurice Dantec's dense Deleuzian cyber noir *Babylon Babies*, which grew from a low-budget French production to a much bigger Hollywood effort when Vin Diesel became attached, only for the studio to take control of the final version out of director Matthieu Kassovitz's hands – to the dismay of Diesel, a serious sf enthusiast trapped in a rather unfortunate screen persona of which he has to make what he can. But though Kassovitz has disowned the studio cut, it's hard to gauge what his intended version would have looked like. The novel's hugely intricate geopolitical tectonics were never going to be filmable, and even the core storyline about people-smuggling a mysteriously bioweaponised girl across borders was significantly reshaped long before the studio got their hands on it. There's clearly an ambition to do a kind of globalised political action thriller, part Bourne and part *Children of Men*; but the point, including that of the now-meaningless title, gets lost in a fog of tedious cultic intrigues.

figures set against lushly naturalistic water-colour backgrounds; or that the storyline is almost optimised for animation, with the same scenes repeatedly replayed and an impressive climactic sequence of two characters at large in an otherwise timestopped Tokyo. Rather, it's that anime heroines are allowed a spirit and energy not really seen their live-action counterparts, and Hosoda's interpretation of the novel – an updated transplant rather than a straight adaptation, has taken the shrewd opportunity to supplant the novel's meeker original heroine by her teenage niece as the centre of the story. The result is a warm, affirmatively shoujo-centric slice of naturalistic fantasy drama with a properly plotted science-fictional rationale, twist, and ending, even if credulity is stretched a bit by all three.



Belgian animation **Fly Me to the Moon** tells the secret history of the Apollo 11 mission as seen through the compound eyes of three young male flies who stow away in the capsule and save the mission unsung by microrepairing an electrical fault on board and preempting a sabotage operation in Mission Control by evil Soviet counter-flies. Such momentum as the concept has was largely absorbed by the summer's earlier *Space Chimps*, at which the more historically grounded *Fly Me* takes a swat in its prologue showing the unromantic reality behind that film's cuddly anthropomorphism and cop-out interplanetary fantasy. On balance, *Fly Me* is slightly the stronger film of the pair, making the most of its period setting and score, and with some visually impressive 3D IMAX set pieces stacking up strongly against *Chimps*' much cruder backgrounds and character designs. But the plot is frankly thin, with little active role for the flies to play in what is after all a fairly dull and documented historical narrative, and (perhaps in tune with its larger story) it's very much a little boys' film, with nothing whatever for girls to engage with. In a strange twist, the real Buzz Aldrin pops up stiffly at the end to disown the entire film off what are evidently very large cue cards: "There were no contaminants on Apollo 11. It is a scientific impossibility."



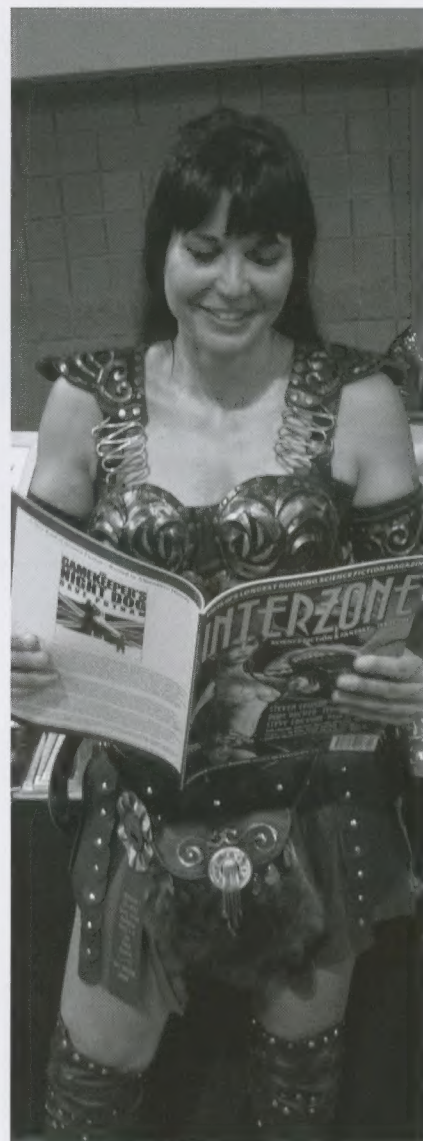
Tarsem Singh's extraordinary **The Fall** is a loose remake of the 1981 Bulgarian film *Yo Ho Ho*, in which a suicidal actor paralysed from a back injury befriends a child in hospital with an exotic improvised adventure yarn designed to lure its listener into an unwitting, and lethal, real-world conspiracy. Lee Pace's failed stuntman hero and the fantasy epic he spins are both rather tiresome in themselves, but what the film misses narrative, character, and pace it recovers in sheer gobsmacking visual panache, thanks to a barmy stroke of genius that doesn't so much think outside the box as smash the box to pieces with its head. Tarsem's innovation is as simple in concept as it is insane: develop a story around seven characters in costumes so bizarre you could recognise them at half a mile's distance, and then send the costumes

on a world tour of stupendous second-unit locations with a team of longshot stand-ins, and shoot them traipsing across the most amazing sites and scenery you can scout in South Africa, India, the UK, Bali, Fiji, Italy, Spain, Prague, Romania, China, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Turkey, Egypt, and Cambodia. I'm not sure which of these plays "Los Angeles, Once upon a Time", where the story is actually set: a bold perversion of the standard practice of making LA play everywhere else in the world. Made before *Pan's Labyrinth*, which it inevitably recalls to its disadvantage alongside *The Princess Bride* and a rather oddly-judged homage to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, it outstays its welcome and badly fluffs its ending, but remains one of the very few films that can truthfully claim to be unlike anything else ever seen.



But the year's strangest film has to be the truly bizarre **Mutant Chronicles**, and not just by virtue of being the first post-apocalypse survival-horror steampunk shooter to be come out of the Isle of Man. Based on, but giving no actual credit to, the long-established RPG mythos of the same name, it presents us with a world seven hundred years in the future in which civilisation has fallen once to a spaceborne zombification machine which got buried somewhere in the Ukraine and is unearthed during a renascent humanity's inexplicable replay of WWI between tin-hatted tommies and future Nazis in period clobber with bigger and noisier guns. Now all that stands between humanity and zombie apocalypse

is Thomas Jane and his plucky team of nothing-to-lose expendables, including a hot ninja nun under a vow of silence and Ron Perlman as a Irish action monk who unembarrassedly continues to narrate the film in the first person even after he's been decisively killed, twice. A *Risk*-style map of the new world order plays no actual part in the story, and Sean Pertwee and John Malkovich vie for the coarsest cameo and death scene. An abnormally long producer list suggests that the entire film is in effect a 111-minute tax avoidance package; I don't know if any of the backers have anything left, but as a surreal souvenir of the world before the apocalypse, I'd say it's money well spent.



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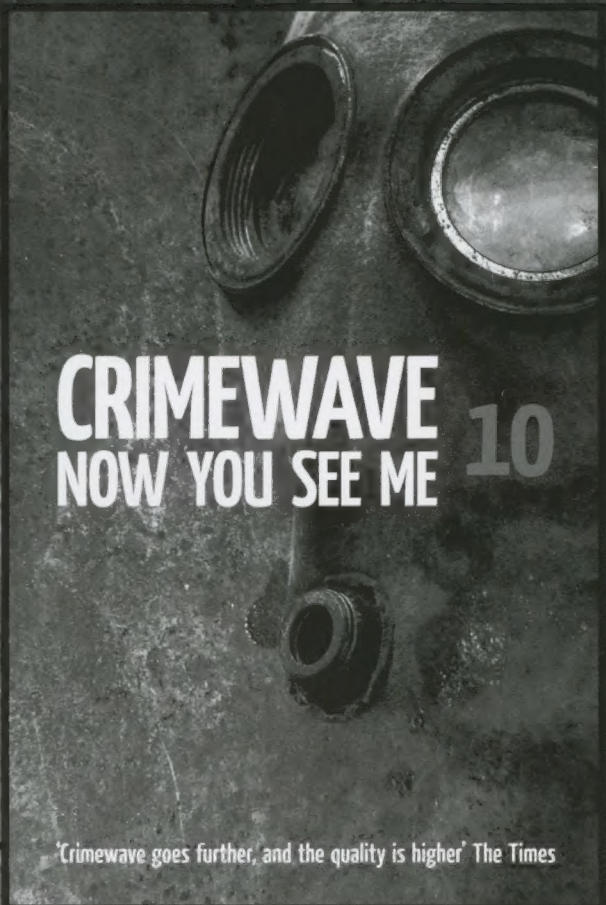
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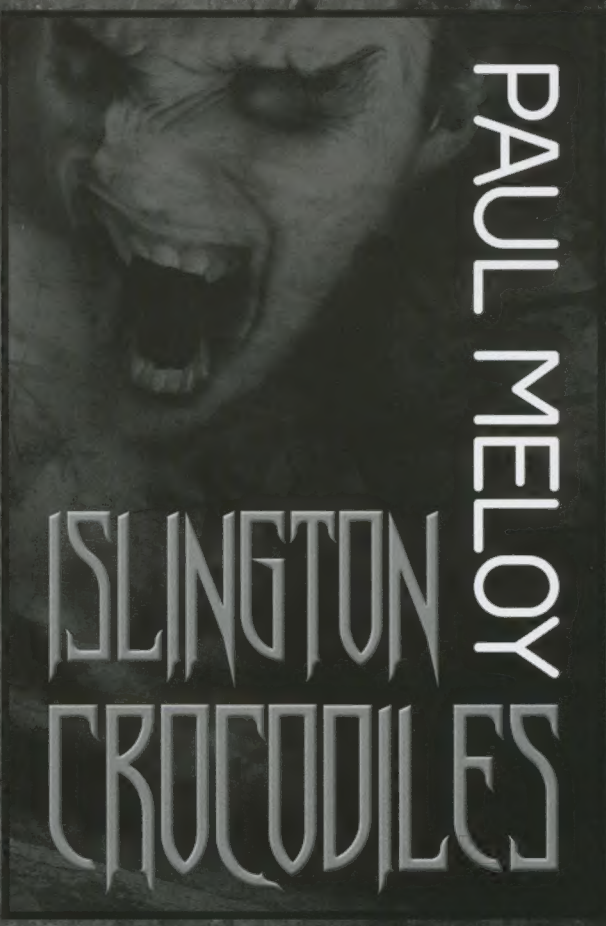
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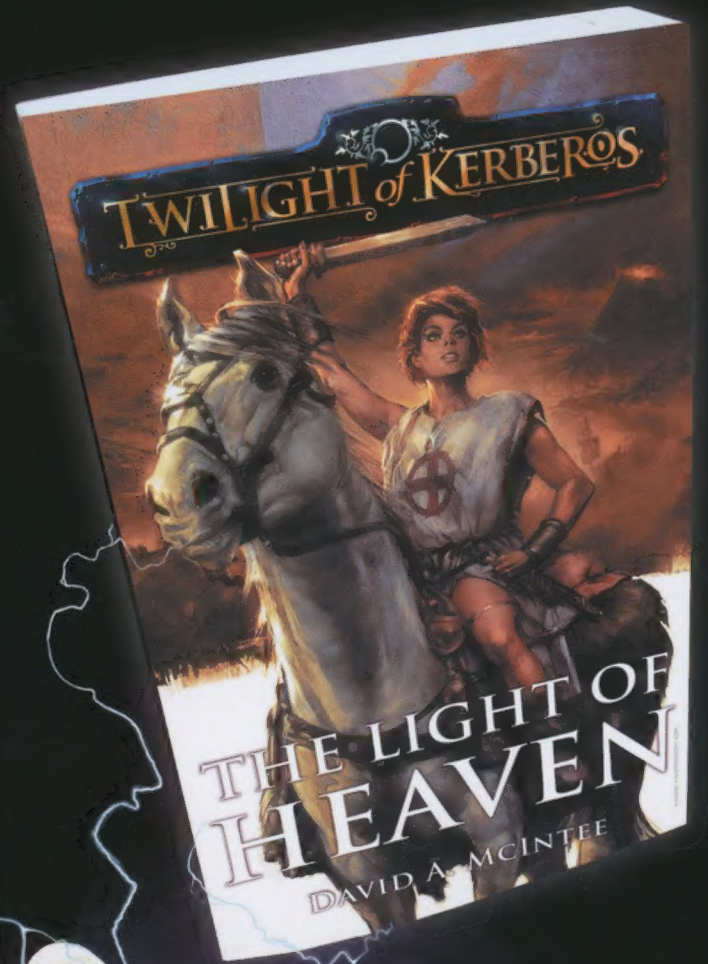
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